

Spring An Our Flag Means Death Zine Tides



VOLUME II

Ahoy there matey!

Thank you sincerely for purchasing VOL.2 of Spring Tides. Your support means the world to us and FINE Pasifika, our charity of choice.

We started this project to celebrate two things:

- ❖ A show that resonated so deeply with those who, for far too long, have waited to see themselves reflected—represented—on screen
- ❖ And the brilliant, vibrant community surrounding it, all of whom have so much love and passion in their hearts

As much as it was a challenge to coordinate an open-call zine of this scale, it was only right that just as The Revenge welcomes all into its crew, we let everyone, regardless of skill level and experience, express their love for this show.

And by God, the work we put into managing the moving parts of this project pales in comparison to the sheer amount of talent on show. We can't thank our 170+ contributors enough for trusting us with their gorgeous work.

We hope that you enjoy the fruits of their labour, and that you find within these pages even a semblance of what Our Flag Means Death inspired within us: acceptance, pride, joy. Love, shameless, enduring—

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THE SPRING TIDES MOD TEAM

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Spring Tides: An Our Flag Means Death Zine VOL. II is a non-profit, charity fanzine dedicated to the HBOMax TV show Our Flag Means Death. All proceeds from this zine are donated to FINE Pasifika, a Pacific LGBTQI+/MVPFAFF+ focused charitable trust.

TYPEFACES

Monk Gothic, Cormorant Garamond, Trattatello, Hoefer Text Pro Fleurons.

ASSETS

Initial conception and design style by Marina Fraguas.

All images and textures taken from Pixabay.

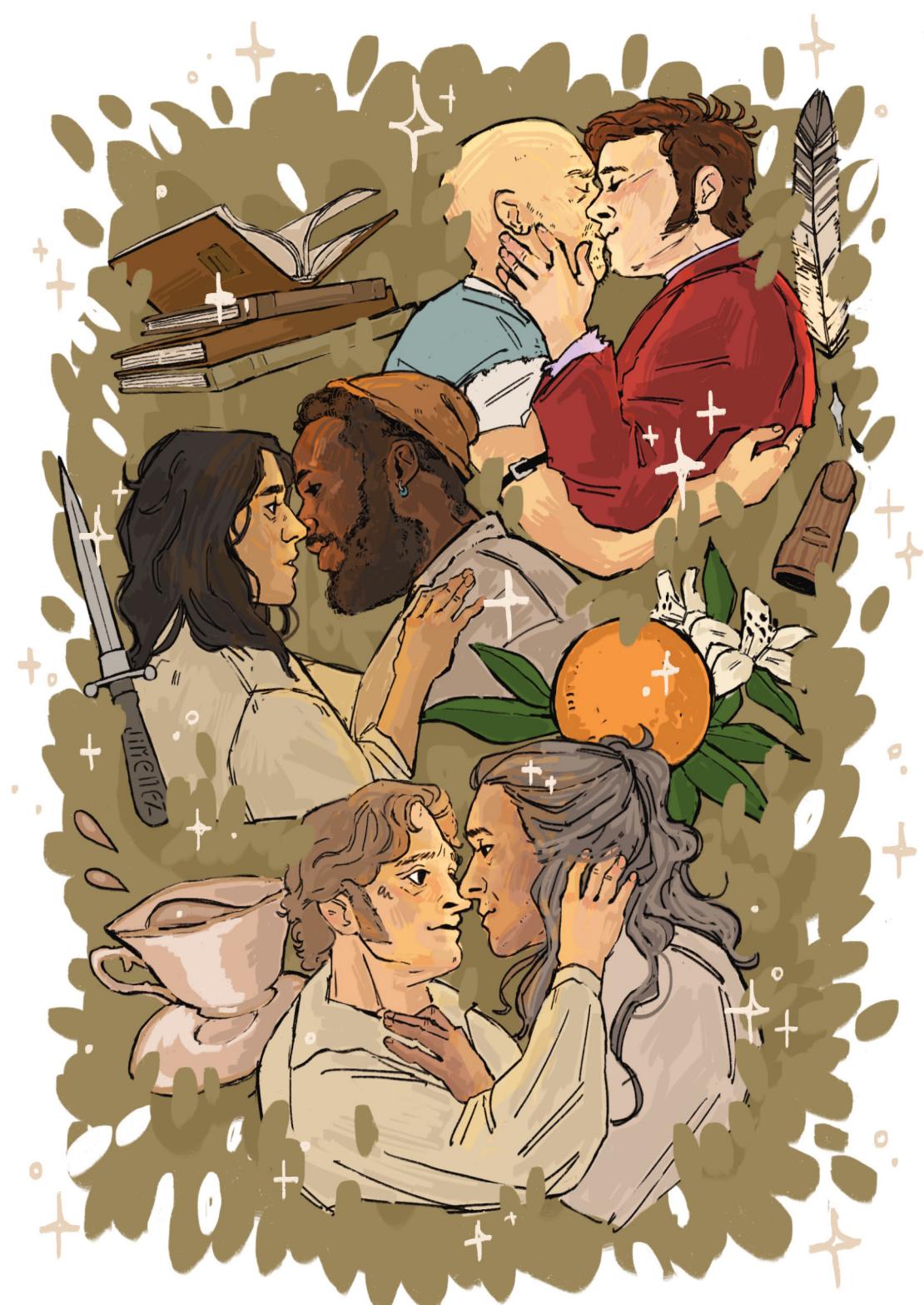
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Printed by Mixam UK 2023.

This project was organised on stolen land. Spring Tides wishes to pay our respects to the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and their elders, past, present, and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded.



SPRING TIDES: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAMIEN GERARD

AN EXCLUSIVE Q&A WITH THE ACTOR WHO PORTRAYED BLACKBEARD'S FATHER.

no content warnings apply.



Damien Gerard is a classically trained actor with over 25 years improv experience who has starred in various films, TV shows, and games. Damien is a kind and resilient individual, having overcome a serious illness and gone on to pursue acting with more enthusiasm than ever! He is also a proud nerd, writer and tabletop RPG player.

1. What's your perspective on how your character affected Ed, given his role in the 'creation of Blackbeard' so to speak? Were you at all a part of the brainstorming surrounding Ed's relationship with his father?

I think Father Teach affected Ed in ways we don't yet know. In your formative years, a dominant father figure can really shape an impressionable young mind. I hope that if it gets renewed that we get to find out more in season 2.

2. Did you have any specific approach on how you prepared for the role, as Blackbeard's dad is ostensibly the bad guy of the family? Did you create any sort of backstory for him?

The thing about bad guys is that they rarely consider themselves the villain. I always create backstories for my characters. I have a list of 65 questions that I answer before playing a role to help me 'get into character'. It's something my

old acting coach in the UK taught me and it's served me very well over the years. I won't bore you by my process but I find that I get into character best once I learn how to literally walk as the character. So in this role, I walked round my trailer for a while until I 'got him'.

3. Do you see any future explorations into your character, perhaps in a potential season 2? We could definitely see you haunting Blackbeard like the Badminton's haunted Stede!

I would absolutely love to be on season 2 of OFMD. I had such a great time there that it would be great to be back. As for the chances of that happening, well, sadly I have no idea. However, I have had this absolute groundswell of support from the OFMD fans and I'm grateful for every one of them supporting me and lifting me up. I've even heard that one fan has started a petition on change.org to get me back on the show either in the same role or as one of the crew members! I could totally see me haunting Ed too.

4. Did you and the actors playing Young Ed and Ed's mum have to decompress after filming your scenes together?

The two actors who played my family are wonderful people and we spent time chatting between takes. I don't think we had to decompress as they were all so professional and good that I think they just took it into their natural stride.

5. What was the general atmosphere like on set? Did you have any favourite behind-the-scenes moments that you wouldn't mind sharing?

The atmosphere was incredible. So many passionate, creative, wonderful people. My favourite part was when David Jenkins popped into the set and told me that I was crushing it. I've actually made some permanent friends from some of the crew too. The day we were doing the Kraken scene took place in Studio 29 (I think) which had a lattice-work of rain spouts in the roof. I spent the entire day being bathed in warm rain and it was glorious! The stunt director and the chap who played my stunt double were both fantastically supportive and patient people who showed me how to do low-level wire work, which I had never done before and was a huge bucket list item for me ticked off. Mind you, having my own stunt double was a bucket list item ticked off. As was working on an HBO show. And with Taika. And so on. Basically, it was all I could do not to split my face open from ear to ear grinning with how happy and lucky I was to be on this set, next to some of the most talented actors and crew I have ever had the fortune of working with.

6. What was it like working with the rest of the crew?

The set was busy. And I mean proper busy. There wasn't time for laughing and joking. Yet, they still found time to do it. That, to me, is a sign of a crew that is perfectly in sync with each other, knows where they should be at any given time, how to do their jobs perfectly, and is STILL warm and friendly and supportive. An incredibly passionate bunch of people.

7. Did you do the whole "being swung around by a fake tentacle" stunt yourself? If so, did it take a lot of preparation to achieve?

I did all the low level stunt work. My stunt double did the swinging in the air bits, but the parts where you see me lifted off the ground, and the part where you see me land, were both me. I had a harness strapped over the top of the wetsuit I was wearing under my costume and had one wire attached to my right hip. I started off about two feet off the ground, on a box, being supported by the stunt director and my double, then when the director shouted "action", I 'fell' into the scene, swinging on the wire, and landed on my knees. So much fun!

8. How did you come across this role? Did you expect it to become so big when you auditioned/during production?

My fabulous agent, who I am so lucky to be with, got me the audition, and being that they had previously asked me to keep my 'covid hair', which was now long, thought I was a good fit for the role, especially being British. I had no idea it was going to be as big as it was. Mind you, I had no idea that anyone was attached to it, like Rhys or Taika, when I did my audition. Even then, I wouldn't have treated the audition any different. I throw 100% of me into all my auditions regardless of what channel it's on, who's in it, etc. Once I found out who was in it, I knew it was going to be a hit. Everything Taika touches is gold, in my opinion. I so desperately wanted to be in WWDITS that I was literally jumping round my room with joy when I found out that Taika was in OFMD.

9. What was it like moving to LA? Did something inspire you to make a big change in your life?

I moved to LA in 2015. Back in 2011 I landed a lead role in a US movie that was shooting in the UK. All the crew and the other lead actors were from the US and after spending several weeks with them, they convinced me that this is where I needed to be. Fortunately, one of the agents for one of the US actors came over, saw me and offered to sponsor my visa. It took me a few years of scrimping and saving money before I could make the move, but I

believed in myself so much that I thought the sacrifice of leaving my loved ones and family was warranted.

10. What's been your reaction to all the fan content surrounding the show? Is there anything that you'd personally want to explore in the future in terms of your character?

I am bowled over and completely humbled by all the love and support I've received from the fans of the show. It means more to me than you can imagine. For a while during the pandemic and while I was undergoing chemo and radiation therapy for cancer, I thought my career, and maybe even my life, was over. I wanted to throw myself 100% back into my career once I was able, and to think that my tertiary character was hated by so many people, for the right reasons, makes me realise that I did what I set out to do; create an unlikable character to help show why Ed was like he was. I am blessed to be doing what I do and I want to keep doing that for decades to come. I continue to train weekly on my acting ability and I just know that through my perseverance, and honestly through the love and support of all the wonderful folks out there who lift me up, I will achieve everything I set out to do.

You may find Damien on Instagram, TikTok, Cameo, Youtube, and Twitter with the username @DamienTGerard!







THE NEW LIGHT

WRITTEN & COMPOSED BY JAQUI, VOCALS BY JAQUI &
VALERIA, MIXED BY WATSON.

"the moment i saw you... for the first time."



scan this QR code to download the
song, or visit the link below:
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THE ART OF COOKERY

INVENTED AND TRIALED BY JI-HYUN.

Our Flag Means Death inspired recipes to cook in the comfort of your ship!



RECIPES INCLUDED:

Strawberry Oat Biscuits (V)

Breakfast Quiche (V)

Stede's Marmalade (VG, GF)

Hoki Fish Fingers

Blackbeard's Snake Snacks

Rum Balls (V)

Sailors Shandy (V)

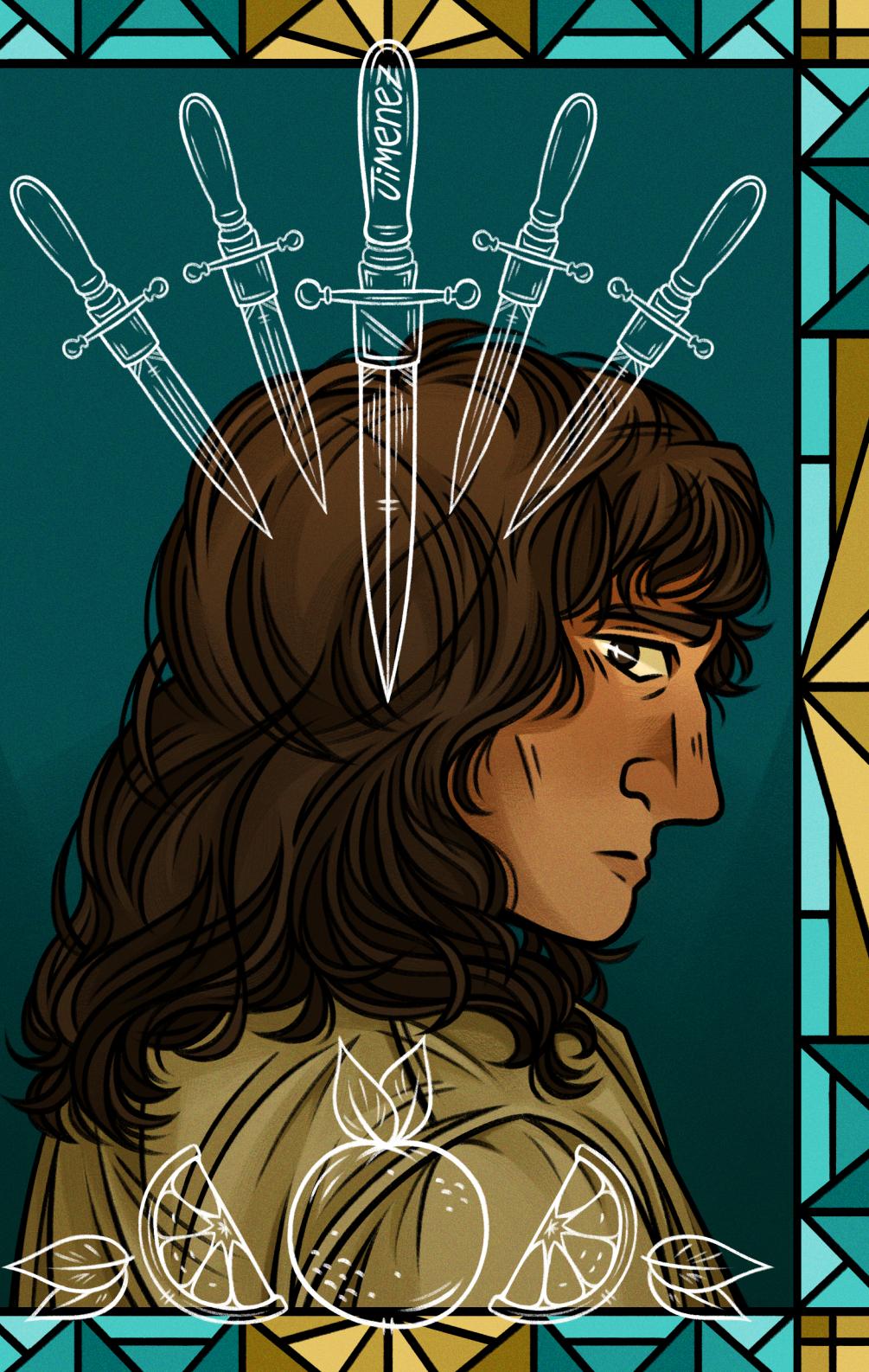
Salted Beef Cracker Board

Roach's Tagine (V)

Orange Glaze Cake (VG, GF)

scan this QR code to download the
recipes, or visit the link below:
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HER BOARDS MEAN DEATH

MARLA HECTIC

CW: *unrealism, animal eating human.*

Stede Bonnet never questioned the name of the ship he found himself buying after one of the most radical existential crisis' ever to have been witnessed by Humanity. After all, *The Revenge* was a rather *pirate-y* name, something that clearly aligned perfectly well with what he wanted to be.

Nothing there to see.

If she had had a mouth (and lungs), the ship would have burst into laughter at this, for there was quite a good reason her original owners had chosen *The Revenge* as her name, since she was a cursed vessel. A vessel created from pure violence that had one objective on this Earth of ours: feed on her enemies' blood.

At least, that was what she had been made for; that was all she *knew* when a kind, extremely messed up middle-aged man decided he wanted to make a new life on board with a crew no God of any Creation could completely grasp how he managed to find.

She had found it *hilarious*; he would die within days and, then, she would go back to be the kind of ship she had been built to be.

She had wondered, not without certain guilty pleasure, whether Bonnet's blood would actually also serve her as nourishment or, since he had technically been *her captain*, it would just be regular blood staining all her covers.

The Revenge had been wrong, and a little wooden boy was responsible for her change of ways. A little wooden boy and the not-so-little, nor-so-wooden, man that read his misadventures (most of them, completely earned, to be honest; what a bastard that Pinocchio was...).

There was magic to the enthusiasm Stede put into every one of his words,

just as there was a plethora of *positive* energy spreading from the man. Of the man that wanted to be a pirate, but refused to stop being a complete gentleman every waking minute.

He even paid a salary to his crew! The crew that had tried to mutiny already *thrice* since they had started to stamp upon her once beautifully polished surface with their dirty feet.

The Revenge did NOT want to change. She was happy being a monster-ship that everyone underestimated; but, to her surprise, kindness was more *pious* than the blade of most pirates' seconds in command.

She had been *infected* with Stede Bonnet and, as much as a part of her truly, honestly, missed feeding on blood, she had found that, for some reason, the bizarre energy that came from the not very fulfilling ending to almost all missions *her* new crew got themselves into every other day worked just as well.

Then, one very special day Her Crew got *combined* with a new batch of pirates, this flock much more *pirate-y* in the non-gentleman-ish manner that had already started to fade away in her completely incorporeal memory. Part of her cheered at the missing feelings of *Proper Pirates* inside of her.

Still, after all those months with Bonnet's crew (and especially Bonnet himself), she didn't feel quite comfortable around the new *acquisitions* either.

She had changed too much for old-fashioned pirates, as that Izzy-man seemed to need to prove he was every second he was breathing (that, with his levels of stress, might not be as constant as it should have been healthy for any *meat sack*).

There was one exception, though.

Someone who happened to be the sort of ruthless pirate she had missed while having that very special sensibility she had learnt not only to appreciate, but to *embrace*.

His name was (is) Fang, and he missed his dead dog very much.

Hence, her brilliant plan: she was about to bring him a new pup. He seemed responsible enough to make sure the little devil didn't turn her into his personal lavatory and, if it did...Well, she had her ways of making a hot meal out of something as teeny tiny as an almost new-born canine.

They were remaining inland for a couple of days.

Apparently, Stede and his new co-captain/partner Ed had had the fallout of the century and now that they were back together they wanted some time on land for themselves.

The Revenge was static about said development. She had been rooting for things to work out between the two of them. There was no way from outside her perspective to simply imagine the almost literal *chills* she got when her own being was in direct contact with the tender *I Never Left* Ed had dedicated to Stede.

Going back to the point; she had a few days to *observe* and, somehow, lure a poor innocent abandoned (or not so abandoned) pup inside of her.

She located the animal rather quickly, for there were plenty of those sell-outs (as it is well known, one of those pirates that had turned their back to their real people to work for the British Army) with more puppies of dubious origin than anyone should own.

Fang had interacted only once with the smallest of the lot, as he was still one-third dressed after he had allowed the now missing several fingers Lucius to paint him.

The animal was on the street, apparently having dropped and, his ass to the wind with all the proud, none of the same, the man had run towards the little one, which was badly hurt, or so had Fang believed, as the owner came and, barking at him in a fashion none of his *mascots* could even get close to, leaving it clear he could do nothing.

Unless he wanted his new precious crew to have the whole British Army on their feet, likely to be all dead within the day, he had to let *his pure breed dog alone*.

Nasty man, the kind nobody would miss and, if there was no body...it wasn't as if they could report any of *her crew*, right?

Firstly, she had to manage to keep Fang inside her for a little while, for he deserved to be the one to bring her back a new *snack* of HER old diet. That one was extremely easy: for he had been interested in going the *extra step* with Lucius for forever and, now, she could just push the right doors open and closed at the precise moments so the instances in which both were trapped in the very same room were more than enough to make an even hotter mess (pun intended) of the pirate; while Lucius...well, would likely just have fun with it.

He would never do something that made the other half feel...*forced*, but, toy-ing until the other sweated and then commenting on it with Black Pete?

Absolutely. *The Revenge* hoped he would pay her back for the joy (and, if Fang actually made up his mind eventually, the *Big Fun*) by painting her as the fancy ship *she totally was* in his books.

So, here she got Fang alone inside of her, laying down on his bed, contemplatiing the roof while trying very hard to deconstruct years and years of a toxic masculinity the ship was more than afraid wasn't going to go away until all her wood had been reused for some Capitalist *miss-purpose*.

Now, the teeny tiny dog.

Apparently, he was the very best of all his siblings, so he got extra hours with his terrible owner (hooray for him!), who liked to take him for a stroll in the bay.

Just as much as he liked to feed him nasty regular boring dog food, never actual real meat (at this point, if you, dear reader, are wondering how a ship knew so much about other humans that had never even stepped close to her, the answer is simple and double: ships *do speak* among themselves and Frenchie just seemed to believe *The Revenge* was a sentient being –as *she actually was*– because *it was science*).

Alas, her plan was simple: burn some meat so the smell was just *too* much for the pup to resist. For the ship to manage it, she just trembled enough so some forever-on candles (she couldn't have told for the love of all artisan and sea gods why, what use they had of those; she personally believed Jim took them so they could be even a little bit more *overdramatic*, but she could not be certain about it) to fall into the barrels of salted meat.

The second the smoke reached the puppy's nostrils, his owner was doomed.

Both entered her.

Time to prove Her Flags could still mean Death.

(Because she currently had multiple flags, had she ever *said* how creative Her Crew is?)

The turn-cloak and the soon-to-be-theirs puppy rushed inside and, just as expected, made it to the lower decks as the canid had only one thing in his basic mind: food.

The ship groaned, for the man stepped on absolutely every single point of her floors that were in dire need of repairs (manners!), but only made herself creak a bit as complaint.

They reached the room where the small fire had started barely minutes before Fang.

Now, the doggie wasn't stupid, and the moment he saw the fire he knew there would be No Food for him, instead only Danger in this unknown place and Punishment from Master...

...punishment that begun immediately.

I, your anonymous narrator, refuse to spend even a second speaking about a cruelty that was brutally interrupted by Fang who, seeing the scene, went even more berserk than that one time they faced some Spaniards that had started using their colourful book of insults on *The Revenge*'s crew (and Jim had dutifully translated all of them. Ah, the Spanish! Those *know how to insult you*).

By the time Fang had finished with the former man, he was just...a badly-drawn person by a child, the three-dimensional edition.

Obviously, the puppy was so glad of having actual meat he decided his saviour was his new Master, since he had not only prevented him from terrible physical pain, but given him a *Very Nice Meal*.

And the Fire? You may ask, as you imagine how the terrible man was digested by a puppy in the sentient ship's insides...

...luckily for everyone, Buttons had also stayed, for some undisclosed reason, and put it out while thinking how adorable it was to see Nature opening its path through the world was as he witnessed the dog's first proper lunch in quite a while.

When the rest of Her Crew came back, everyone almost collapsed with anxiety as they realised they had murdered someone that could have very powerful friends.

However, Stede just shrugged.

"The British Army already hates us beyond their own possibilities, this is no news."

As he had a point, everyone relaxed *ever so slightly* until Black Pete pointed out something that, otherwise, should have been obvious.

"And the blood? Is the puppy secretly a vampire?"

"Oh! That!" Buttons said, as Fang was too busy petting his new friend. "The ship kind of *absorbed* it. She seemed happy."

"Indeed I was, pal," she thought, creaking discretely in agreement.

"Oh? Our ship cleans itself? Neat!" Stede said.

"Monster ship!" Ed replied, enthusiastically. That, dear Edward, the ship was not so fond of, but, since he called himself *The Kraken*...she decided to take it as flattery.

And here I leave you, dear public, me, The Revenge, the once cursed ship now turned into a more complex, bizarre *Thing*. With a man and his dog (named The-Cheerful-Izzy) playing on me.

Nice times.







bgm'22



Captain Stede Bonnet of the Revenge, known as the Gentleman Pirate shown here with his Partner and Lover, the fearsome Villain Captain Edward Teach - known across the four corners of this world as the wicked pyrate Black-beard. These rogues are known for their Dishonorable pyrratical acts alone but Together this Brace of Reprobates form a Coalition so Terrible that no fleet would Dare to oppose them!



THE SALT IN MY HEART

ALLIUM LARK

no content warnings apply.



My dear Bonnet,

I write this from the dock, an hour before we are to steal away. A gentleman should always be precisely on time, as to not inconvenience his guest, but I've never been much of a gentleman if I'm being honest. That's your job to deal with the fickleness of rules. I could just tell you when you get here, but fuck it, it's just me and my thoughts so I figured we could have a nice conversation.

It's peaceful. It's not often I hear the insects singing; my early morning song is that of the waves and the gulls. Did you know bugs could make this much noise? It's like you can hear them from the constellations.

I've counted all the stars in the sky since I laid down on the sea-sprayed wood of this dock. Poetry. I'm rather good at it, don't you think? Soon the only wood that will be beneath our feet will be the floor of my bar and grill. Blackbeard never had thoughts like these before he met you, but Blackbeard is gone and dead. Shaved off by gentler hands. He's better off on the ground anyways. His future was as black his beard. More grey and dull than anything, really. Ah well, maybe my poetry still needs work.

Ed though, that's a man with a future. I hope you can learn Mandarin better than me, that might poke a few holes in some plans. I'm not really worried about that though, you're the scholar. Me though? I'm a people person. You made me see that. Jeff the accountant has a comeback waiting for him in the high caste circles of China. Or maybe fuck Jeff, maybe I'll be a John, or a Fredrick, wouldn't that be something?

Or maybe, I'll just be Ed. I want to find out what it's like to live in his life.

He's got excellent taste in partners, so I've heard. I'd be worried if I were you, this fresh face might be a hot commodity. Might find a new restaurant partner too. I could impress him with my knowledge on utensils. Too bad for him, it wouldn't be very polite to abandon my current partner, would it? Consider yourself lucky for now, my dear.

I am lucky, in truth. That I've had someone to show me a million fucking different forks. I didn't know there were that many. Truly, life-changing. You are. Life-changing, that is. I mean, here I am on this damp fucking dock, counting stars. Ah, you caught me. I gave up counting them after 30. Too boring. These stars have guided me to safety and riches that greater men could only dream of, but all those years I failed to see their light the way I do now. Is this how you see the world? Even in the cold dark of the night there is so much beauty. I think I'd like to see the world this way for the rest of my life.

Think of it. You and I, sitting on, well, I don't know. A porch? Do people still have porches? Never mind that. We will. We'll be sitting on our porch, after serving someone a roasted snake or something, my specialty, and we'll be looking at the sky, and at all the stars we couldn't see from the *Revenge*. Maybe we'll be whittling something too. Make another boat, like the one you had in the cabin. Or we could paint. That lighthouse was quite inspiring. We'll paint so many fucking lighthouses the town will think we're mad. The market value of lighthouse paintings is going to plummet when we're done. Mad Ed and Crazy Stede, the lighthouse men.

Hey, maybe we could start a theatre troupe where you blow fire into a fucking mirror again for kicks. We don't just paint lighthouses; we *are* the lighthouses. How long do you think it'll take for them to send us back to the sea? Their loss. We're fucking great, you and me. You're fucking great. Not great at being on time though, you'll have to work on that.

What's keeping you anyways? The boat's been here forever. It's lonely. Could really use someone with a lovely silk robe. I hope the guy I took this boat from doesn't find me before you do. I'd hate to leave a body in our wake. Or our boat. Wouldn't that be awkward? Just you, me, and our lovely... well, donor wouldn't be entirely inaccurate, would it? I should've nicked your pocket watch. It probably hasn't been as long as it feels. Yeah, that's probably right. You wouldn't keep me waiting like this. You're a *gentleman*.

Now, if only I could fucking write, then this letter could actually be read. We all have our flaws, I suppose.



My dearest Bonnet,

Did you know there is a constellation shaped like a lighthouse? Well, there isn't, because I made that up while waiting for you. It doesn't even really look like a lighthouse but I'm telling myself that it does. I put the top of it as the North Star; it guides us. Am I allowed to use a star that's already in a different constellation? Of course I fucking can, I'm a bloody pirate. I do what I want. Which is why I'm wondering why I'm still laying here, waiting for you, and making up new stars to count. Did you sleep in? Do I need to shine one of these stars right through the window? Come on, a lighthouse shouldn't need to be guided to where it's meant to be. Kind of defeats the purpose, no?

Perhaps. A lighthouse isn't infallible. Sometimes the fog is too thick, it doesn't make any sense. Perhaps it leads a ship astray, into the rocks. Fuck, Stede, did I crash us into the rocks?

Since this is my head's letter, I suppose I have a confession to make. I don't know what I'm doing. What we're doing. I thought I had things figured out but maybe I'm just stuck in a fog, and I just chased a light to what I thought was safety, but instead all I've found is an empty night.

I've been listening to the sound of the waves crashing against the dock. Waves that should be carrying us away to better places and better times. This place is a shithole, frankly. I'd rather eat Fang's toenails than try to choke down what passes for cuisine here in the British army. I mean really, you've got the spices of the whole fuckin world and you don't even use them in your food? I never thought I'd miss Roach, but at least he knows what *paprika* is. Or anything that isn't boiled. Literally anything. I bet the British are to blame forhardtack. Come on Stede, I want to taste real fucking food, cooked by real fucking chefs. I don't think anyone could cook a meaner snake than us though.

Can I be honest with you? Sure thing, Ed. Thanks mate. To be honest, I'm really upset. You opened my eyes to a world of love and light and freedom, but you haven't the courtesy to share that world with me? Ed can't survive out there, he's scared and nervous and hasn't a fucking clue how to use utensils. Ed's starting to feel smaller and smaller on this dock. I've got to stop counting stars before the world gets too big for me.

I know you said you didn't like me with Calico Jack. Is this part of it? Was there some part of you that realized you can't return to our ship with me? This is me, Stede. This is Ed. I have never lied to you about who I am. I'm

changing, I think. I just thought we'd do it together, mate. I *hoped* we would.

Eh, what am I saying? It's not daylight yet. My paranoid mind is getting the best of me. I should let you sleep. You've still got time. You needn't worry yourself with my musings. I'm just tired and miss you. I think I'll rest my eyes for a bit. Keep myself from feeding my anxieties.



Stede,

I can see the light; it's the sun.

I understand now; you were never coming.

Perhaps it was time we steered away. A ship can only run smoothly with one captain, mate. Maybe co-captains were never an idea that could've worked, not for lack of trying, I think we both put our best effort in. But you can't make a shirt out of silk and steel. Not a good one at least, or one that's very comfortable to wear. Eventually it'll rub you the wrong way, so best to throw the whole shirt away before it chafes your nipples in the wrong way. Nothing worse than sore nipples in a bad shirt.

I've been sitting here looking at the horizon. It's gorgeous. You'd like the colours of the sun right now. It matches your spring silk; you know the one. It would look nice with your hair. It's a shame you'll never see this sunrise.

I've got a long journey ahead, really should be on my way. The tides are changing.

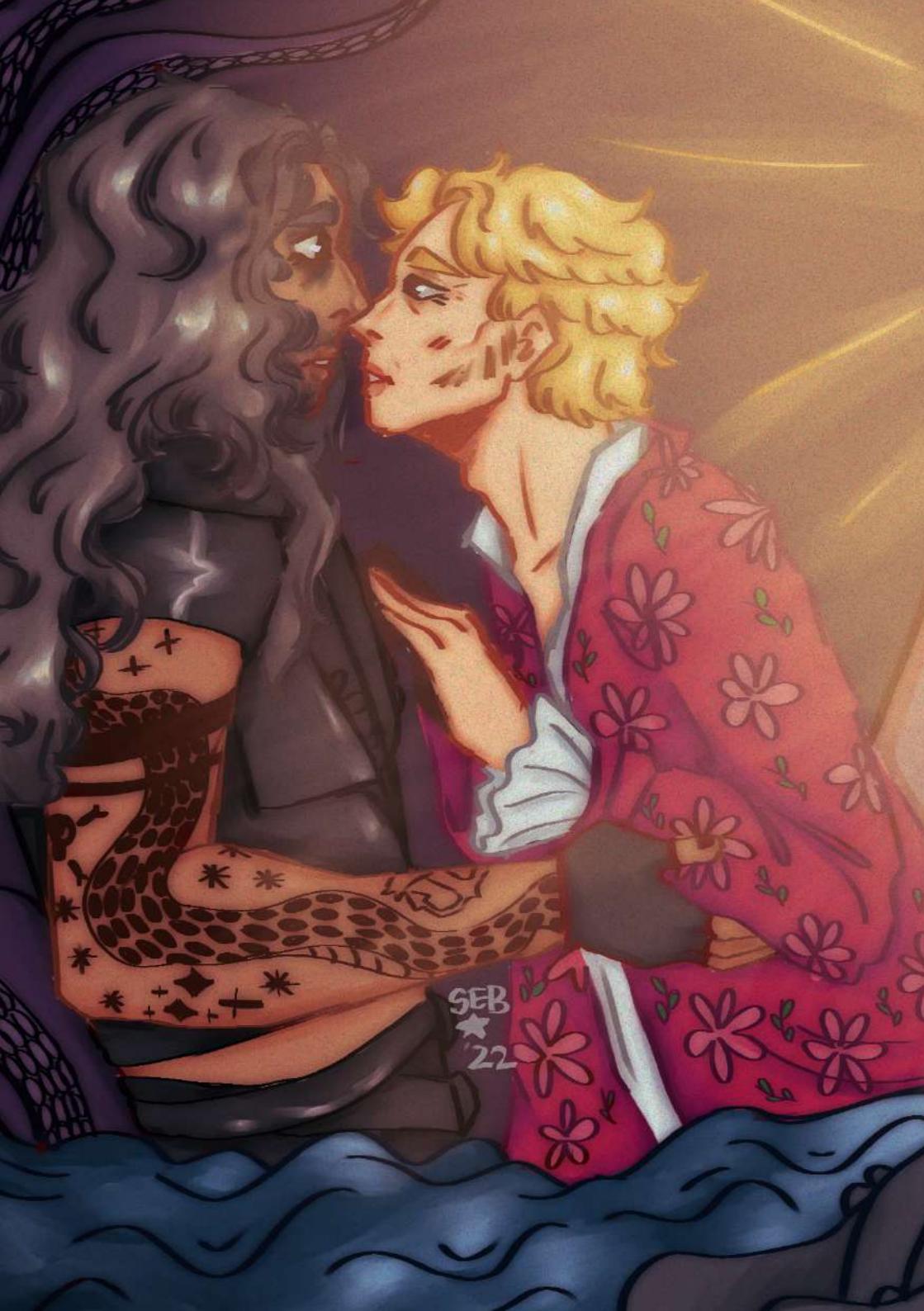
I hope I'll find you where our souls said we'd meet.

Yours,

Ed







elahogn.



THE TWO DEATHS OF STEDE BONNET

CAR KURYAKIN

no content warnings apply.

Stede Bonnet had died twice.

The first time, he didn't know until someone else had told him.

"You are... dead," said the man at the desk when they arrived at the Privateering Academy.

"Excuse me?" Stede answered, confused. Had he misheard?

"According to these records, Stede Bonnet has been deceased for months."

"Oh."

It had not been a clerical error. It had been Mary who told the whole world that Stede Bonnet had died. But he was alive and back, and the rumor of him being caught would probably start spreading around soon, and he didn't know what was going to happen next because everything had happened too soon: the Spanish Navy officer stabbing him, Ed appearing to save him, those weeks they had spent together, Izzy's treason and Ed saving him again, this time from the firing squad only seconds before they shot him. It was too much and he was starting to feel sick.

He tried breathing a couple of times, with his eyes closed, and when his thoughts seemed to slow down, he looked at the rustic ceiling of the barracks, forcing himself — unsuccessfully — not to think too much about what he had just learned. He tried focusing instead on the rough texture of the sheets and the simplicity of the fabrics and the muted colors of the uniform he now wore, on the hard boards beneath the austere mattress of his bunk bed, but it didn't seem to work.

"You are... dead."

He was officially dead.

Stede wondered what had gone through Mary's head to make that decision, but he simply couldn't wrap his mind around it. He had thought that by leaving he was setting her and his family free. Wouldn't it have been easier if Mary just let him get lost in the sea? But she had always been practical and knew what had to be done.

And he knew he deserved it. He had run away in a selfish, cowardly act. He hadn't thought things through, not even when he presented the ship model as an anniversary gift. He had only been thinking about himself, too caught up in his own misery to even consider the consequences of his fantasy. And at the time he hadn't even imagined how else to do it. Or perhaps all this time he had been harboring the hope of meeting his end at sea.

"Do you want to live?" Oluwande's question rang clear and strong in his memory, and back then he hadn't known the answer.

But things were different after all he'd been through. He had tasted what it felt like to be free, and he knew he wanted to live and needed to escape.



Ed's resistance to his attempts to come up with a plan had been confusing and disheartening. Stede stared at Ed's shaved face and at his passive attitude that looked suspiciously like defeat and he didn't want to believe it. So he ran again. Because it seemed it was the only thing he could ever do.

But then Ed had found Stede at the beach and had kissed him, and had been excited, with that sparkle in his eyes again. And despite the fear and the uncertainty Stede felt inside him, he was hopeful.

So, when Chauncey pointed at him with the gun and said all those things that Stede knew were true, he thought it was just fine if he died right there. It would have been justice for Mary, for his children, for Nigel, for Ed, and for every single person he ruined just by being around, his selfish self. And he waited for the rumble of the pistol and the blow of the lead on his chest, while panic grew at the pit of his stomach. But when he heard the shot, he realized it had not been aimed at him. Chauncey laid on the ground, dead, with a shot through his eye and everything went black and suddenly he was running and running and running far, far away, even though he was supposed to go somewhere else.

He never made it to the dock and the dinghy. He never made it to China with Ed. Instead, he found himself barefoot at the door of his old house. Mary's house. His family's house.

Stede tried to go back to his old life, but he didn't fit there anymore.

Mary had wanted to kill him because, after all, he was supposed to be dead. She then told him it had been the only thing she could do back then, it had been the only way to end the shame and the whispering. She had to kill him to be free. And she had been, until he came back from the dead.



The second time Stede Bonnet died, he chose it.

The idea had come to him as an epiphany after Mary and him had talked. His obliviousness really had ruined so many things, but maybe if he rushed, he still could reach Ed.

It was then when it hit him: he needed to be dead. That had been the answer all along.

"Besides, everyone's had a go at killing me but me. I'd like a shot."

His second death had been a revelation. This time it was in his hands and he had the courage to do it. Stede Bonnet had to die on his own terms: dramatic, spectacular and absurd. It had to be a tale people would tell their grandchildren. So it had involved a jungle cat, a carriage, a piano and a very full street of Bridgetown to make sure the news traveled fast to the ears of the English.

It was important that everybody knew that he had been with his wife and his children and that he hadn't left them so shame and the cruelty of others wouldn't touch them. They would be free again, but this time with the knowledge that Stede Bonnet cared about Alma, Louis and Mary enough to not stay. He couldn't change what he had done in the past, but he could try to make peace with them.



As Stede pulled the dinghy to the water, the sun setting on the horizon, he thought about his second death as a second chance, a new beginning with a clean slate, without guilt. And when he was rowing, taking advantage of the tide, he felt hopeful maybe for the first time ever. And the feeling was good.





PERFECT IMPERFECTION

BRENNAN THOMAS

no content warnings apply.

“I’m not a good person, Stede,” Ed confessed, sniffing into his arm.

“That’s not true,” Stede reached his hand out and cupped his face, “I don’t believe that for a second. We’ve all...done some things that we’re not proud of. Me particularly. I left my family. I abandoned them. I’m still struggling to forgive myself for that.”

Ed met his eyes, tear-stained and red.

“It wasn’t the kraken,” he whispered. “... It wasn’t the kraken that killed my dad. It was me. See? I’m just as they say I am. That’s all I am. A cold-blooded killer. A murderer. Why would you want to stick around with me?”

“Because I believe the best in people. My crew? They have all done things, but I don’t judge them for it. This is not all you are, Ed. There is so much more to you than all the rough, pirate-y stuff you’ve done. You know what I see?”

“What?”

“I see a man who is trying his best to live up to a reputation that he doesn’t fit into anymore. I see someone wanting a different life. And you’re allowed to have these things. You can have anything you want. You don’t have to think you don’t deserve it just because of the things you did in the past.” Stede paused for a moment, thinking of himself. How he thought he deserved to die for what he did. “I think I should listen to my own advice.”

“You’re perfect to me, Stede,” said Ed, leaning in closer to rest his head against his.

Stede flushed, feeling a warmth spread through his chest. All he ever wanted to be was good enough. Good enough for his dad. For his wife. For his children. For the people who thought he was nothing and different. He tried so hard to fit in. To be someone else. Now Ed was telling him that it was okay. That he didn’t have to try so hard. Ed accepted him.

“I think the same of you, Ed.”

“I feel like I have something to prove, you know? That I have to be a certain way, be Blackbeard - the big scary guy that everyone runs away from! Ahh, Blackbeard! But... the truth is I’m just not. I just want to be Ed.”

“Who is Ed?” Stede asked with interest, a small smile forming on his lips.

The low light of the candle cast over Ed’s face outlining his strong features. The glow made the grey parts of his beard slightly glisten. There was softness here, vulnerability. They could be themselves at this moment. They had each other and there was no one to look down on them for what they said.

“Ed is...” He drew his head back. He pursed his lips and his brows came together in thought. “Ed likes your bookshelves and hazardous fireplace. Ed likes to wear your clothes sometimes. Especially that soft pink gown-thing.”

“Kimono,” supplied Stede.

“Yeah,” Ed said, “And he likes marmalade and fancy tea and singing songs. He likes making up ridiculous plays and Arts of Fuckery!”

Stede cocked his head to the side. “But that’s all the things you do with me?”

Ed’s eyes softened and took on an ethereal warmth that had nothing to do with the light of the candle. Stede felt his throat close up, his heart thumping like a drum. Ed looked so... Well, no one had ever looked at him this way before, ever.

“I guess... I guess I’m more me when I’m with you.”

“You’re just Ed. My Ed.”

“Your Ed,” he repeated. “I think I like that. I like being your Ed.”

“Then what am I?” wondered Stede, not really sure what this all meant.

“If I’m yours, then you have to be mine, too. If you want, that is?”

“Yours,” Stede concluded. “I feel as though I am yours as well. I like who I am when I’m with you.”

“I think we both complete each other, hey co-captain?”

It was more than that. Stede was sure of it and it was why he had grown breathless. He trailed his fingers over Ed's face, Ed's eyes closing at the tender touch.

"Ed?"

"Yeah?"

Their voices had changed to whispers, secrets they shared that would stay between them.

"We do complete each other. I could never do this without you and I don't think you could either."

"What are you saying?"

Ed leaned in further and Stede held his shoulders for support.

"I don't think I could ever find someone who understands me like you, so... I guess I just..." Stede felt like he had just been chased by sharks through ice-cold waters. He shivered and his pulse hammered. He was sure Ed felt it. "I... I don't know how to... if you..."

Then Ed kissed him.

It was the sort of kiss that didn't need any words after and both knew what the other said. It was the type of kiss that wasn't in any way perfect. It was skew, lips on lips and teeth, and in any other situation would have been very awkward, but not with them. Two men that cared for each other whole-heartedly.

And to Stede that was what made it perfect. Because it was Ed. He didn't need anything else.





CRADLING THE MOMENT OF SEPARATION

GABRIEL

no content warnings apply.



Not everyone could be an artist. Something like art needed a certain set of skills; patience to steady the hand, inspiration to give it direction, dedication to keep working, and finally, most important of all, passion to ignite the movement in the first place.

Pete had never considered himself an artist. He was brash, boring, fickle, and lame, all things an artist should never be. The muses simply didn't speak to him.

Then again, what he was doing wasn't art. Art was for fun. It was a hobby. It wasn't necessary, he thought, and this project of his was extremely necessary. Lucius could live missing a finger, sure. He could live missing all of them if it really came to that. But Lucius was an artist. A real artist. One who needed every finger on their skilled hands.

If Pete could have lopped off one of his own fingers and sewn it onto Lucius, he would have just done that. What did he need all of his fingers for anyway? If he could, Pete would have given up any part of his body to restore Lucius'.

Losing a pointer finger makes things such as holding a quill quite difficult. Lucius hadn't been able to do so since the incident. If Pete could help him return to his drawing, then of course he would. He would do anything.

Not everyone could be an artist. And that was fine, because Pete wasn't trying to be.

One hand held the hunk of rough, untreated wood. The other held the handle of a small knife. Using his teeth, Pete unsheathed the blade from its leather casing. He had whittled in the past. Really, only once or twice before, but that was enough to know the basics of what to do. With careful precision,

Pete brought the knife down, pressing the sharp edge into the side of the wood.

He leaned in close, watching the material split against the sharpness. Then, dragging the knife along, Pete pulled up a thin strip of wood which curled backwards over his knuckles. He stopped before the curl was able to detach and fall away. Is this what holding Lucius' hand would be like from now on? Just for a moment, Pete let the wood sit against his skin. There was a warmth to it. Different from the warmth of flesh. Unique. Soft and subtle. The heat of the earth, Pete found, was in all of her creations. It was familiar and also very different. Maybe it would feel less foreign once it was attached to Lucius.

Finally, Pete brushed away the shavings, bringing the knife down and repeating the process. Each time the layers came back to rest on the top of his hand, Pete imagined it was Lucius stroking his rough skin. Pete worked even more slowly from then on, savoring the feeling.

Careful, he thought to himself, do it careful now. Don't get it too short or too thin. You want just the right shape.

Just the right shape to make a home between Lucius' thumb and his middle finger. It would relax in the crook of his hand, where Pete had lingered many times. Lucius' hands were mapped out in Pete's mind. Every curve, every swell, every dip, every nail, and every joint was clear in his mind.

Pete focused on these divine visions, closed his eyes for a moment to better see them. He kept whittling as he did, feeling the wood grow slender in his palm. He used his own hands as measurement, remembering how long Lucius' fingers were in comparison to his and how thick they were when Pete squeezed them tight. It was an easy thing to remember, as if recalling his own name.

Not everyone could be an artist. But this wasn't art. This was something that came naturally, something that ran on instinct. This was for Lucius.

Before he lost the pointer, Lucius would use it as a measuring tool. He would stand on the deck and look out over the ocean. Everyone thought he'd be bored of the sight, having to see it all day and what not. But Lucius was an artist – patient, inspired, dedicated, passionate – and he saw beauty in the ordinary. He sketched the ocean every now and again. Pete would gaze over his shoulder and watch him work magic on the page. A sore sight became something new, something reimagined. Now *that* was an artist.

As he drew, Lucius would hold his hand out and extend his pointer finger, squinting one eye shut to determine where on his skin the waves rose highest and the sun touched lowest. The measurement was put directly on the page, using his finger as the ruler.

A knick in the wood might make that measuring process easier. It would be a point of reference. Pete slashed across the midpoint of the finger, indenting it and making a cosmetic knuckle.

The base of the whole thing was still untouched. That part was important. That was the part that would actually touch Lucius. It would protect his injury, would cradle the moment of separation. It had to be perfect.

Pete got to work hollowing out the wood. Once again using his mental image of Lucius' hands, he ran his own thumb over the empty joint. He felt the place where bone used to rest and took note of the hot, red flesh that was in its place now. In time it would become a scar, white and uneven and shimmering like moonlight. Pete wanted that scar to be something just for him, something that was only ever exposed in the dark of night when they laid side by side.

There was something selfish in his whittling, then. But wasn't all love just a little bit selfish?

Not everyone could be an artist, Pete least of all. But once the base was hollowed out in just the right way, Pete took a moment to look over his creation. It was the right length and the right width. It was smooth, clean, without the risk of splinter. He pictured giving it to Lucius, not expecting any sort of praise, but hoping it might be appreciated. Maybe Lucius would like it. Maybe he would even wear it.

Pete hoped he would wear it. It would be a piece of himself made just for Lucius and a piece of Lucius for just himself to hold onto. Pete could squeeze this finger as tight as he pleased without fear of hurting. It wouldn't grow uncomfortable and sweaty and cause any sort of complaints. He never had to let go.

Pete wasn't an artist. He didn't have the patience to steady his hand, he didn't have inspiration to guide him along the path of creation. He didn't have dedication to move forward, and he certainly wasn't a man of much passion for any craft. He was, however, a lover. It never crossed his mind that the two occupations were very much the same.





Kats
16: artistically_twisted



THE TIES THAT BIND

CLYDE

CW: mention of child abuse.

Writing bloomed on Israel's arm when he was five years old.

He'd been standing on a chair at the time, retrieving a tool for his father, when phantom writing had suddenly seeped from his skin, sending him backwards with a shriek. Israel woke from the fall moments later, miraculously unharmed. His father fixed that by bringing a strip of leather down on top of his right arm, welts distorting the childish scrawl now embedded in his skin, roaring that the Hands didn't abide by any of that soulmate nonsense.

Soulmate? Israel thought before the fear and pain drove him back under.

He woke, he cried, he stifled it, he stared in horror at what looked like tattoos on his right arm — except they ebbed and flowed like the sea, sinking into his flesh until Israel was sure it was poison. Then he kept breathing as more rose up to take their place. It took him a long time to piece together what was happening, his father's screams and the town's whispers all but nonsensical to a child. It was the baker who finally took pity on him, showing him how when his wife wrote out their expenses they appeared on his leg; when he jotted down a recipe it draped her like a necklace. He tapped Israel's arm as the same symbol rose and sank, rose and sank: "Looks like your soulmate is practicing their letters."

Israel traced the shape with his finger, unbothered by the ache of his father's fury. It felt good, the sharp sting every time he mimicked the movements; proof that it was there. Someone was writing to him, talking to *him* —

— and Israel didn't know how to talk back.

Even if his father could look at his arm without going purple in the face, it wasn't like they had the money for schooling. "Real men earn a living through

blood and sweat," he'd say, sneering at the looping words that kept appearing between Israel's elbow and wrist. His soulmate had improved his handwriting immensely over the years, turning a scrawl into delicate calligraphy, now the only beautiful thing Israel's body had to offer, the rest of him all pre-pubescent elbows and dutifully learned sneers. They wrote constantly too, whole pages worth at a time that would turn Israel's skin black with overlapping ink, and by the time he was twelve he didn't need his father to point out the obvious anymore. His soulmate wrote the same way the gentry walked, or spoke, or recoiled from him in his unwashed state, noses tipped pointedly towards the sky. They may have been writing, but it wasn't to him. Israel understood that now. Besides, did he really think his soulmate would be pleased if they ever got to see where their thoughts were ending up?

"Universe is real funny," his father said, words dissolving into a hacking cough. "Pairing you with aponce!"

The knowledge ate at him, burying like worms beneath his skin, but if there was one thing stronger than Israel's self-doubt, it was the desire to prove his father a liar. So, he stole enough jewelry to bribe one of the boatswains down by the docks, earning himself the privilege of writing his own name. Israel memorized those six letters with a devotion he'd shown nothing else and later that night, with only snores and the stars for company, he gathered the courage to carve them into the dirt floor of his room.

Israel didn't know what he expected. Anything his soulmate wrote back would have been intelligible to him, but maybe that didn't matter. He waited for a response — any response — just so that he could say they'd truly spoken. It didn't matter if his soulmate couldn't see the hovel he slept in, or the bruises along his back, or if he never heard the working-class accent that spilled from Israel's lips in spits and curses. He'd have his name and that was more than Israel had ever bothered to give anyone else.

All through the night his arm remained blank though. When the sun rose Israel pulled himself up from a fitful sleep, his heart leapt at what looked like a mark —

— but it was only more dirt.

Past the middle of the day when his soulmate presumably had their lessons. Past the night when they wrote in a faster, messier hand that spoke of passion. Israel's arm didn't show a damn thing for three days straight and by then he'd already made up his mind.

Slipping past his father was easy and snatching what little coin they had

tucked away was easier still. Israel donned a long-sleeved shirt, a single glove to cover the writing that sometimes snuck down onto his hand, and boarded the first ship that would have him.

He'd always remember Hornigold's towering figure and the disdainful look he cast upon Israel's twig-like arms; the way his land legs shook before they'd even hauled anchor.

But he *asked*.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Izzy Hands, Sir."

Israel was left on the dock.

For three years Izzy honed his denial and willful ignorance with the same dedication he approached the sword. It was easy, really. He maintained his long sleeves and single glove despite the Caribbean heat — and the mocking that came with any perceivable difference. There were no more opportunities to learn one's letters on a pirate ship than there had been back home, so he didn't even try to decipher the script that appeared daily on his skin, now caught only in guilty glimpses while changing under the lamplight. Izzy learned to curl his lip like his father had, strike first, strike *hard*, spit when he might have spoken softly and roar when others went quiet. Hornigold's looks morphed from disdain to interest and everyone stopped assuming that Izzy had a soulmate at all.

He believed them... up until a man named Edward Teach put his knife through the meat of Hornigold's thigh, winking as he did it, and Izzy finished the job with an impulse that felt like fate.

The brains of the first man to ever trust him splattered across the planks and it didn't *matter* because a single glance from Edward was worth the loyalty of a hundred others.

My soulmate, Izzy thought, his blood surging with a confidence he had no right to. But what else could this possibly be? He followed Edward with a devotion that existed outside of himself, a feral instinct that would no more be ignored than the tides, and as the weeks passed and Izzy moved from being a Hands to Edward's right hand, he became more and more certain of his place at his side.

Edward could divine the sky with an almost mystical precision. He was the greatest tactician Izzy had ever come across and a veritable devil in battle. There was an energy, and an intellect, and an *obsession* that governed his every move and the more Izzy was pulled into its orbit, the more he became convinced that only Edward could have filled his arm with such beautiful, frantic script.

He was an atheist who'd finally met God and dropping to his knees was such a relief. In fact, Izzy was so sure of his fate — undeserved though it was — that he dared to steal a short-sleeve shirt from the cook and wear it one night when it was just him and Edward in the Captain's cabin, mere hours after he'd been named First Mate. Izzy still had blood staining the tattoo on his cheek and with it the assurance that he'd finally earned his place. Edward wouldn't rear back in disgust at Izzy being his soulmate. Or if he did? Izzy would simply carve himself until he was whatever Edward needed him to be. He'd gotten so good at that.

There was no reaction to the sleeve of writing though, nearly a mirror image to Edward's tattoos in regards to depth and the amount of ink. Izzy marveled at that similarity between them, a little drunk from all the celebratory ale, a little high on the possibility of contentment, and thus it took him too long to realize that the movement in his peripheral vision was not the flickering of candles, but the shifting of text along his skin.

Izzy's soulmark churned like a beast beneath the waves, but Edward wasn't writing anything.

"Huh. Looks a little like mine," he said then, ignorant — or perhaps not caring — that what was left of Izzy's world had just crumbled around him; fragile sandcastles tumbling down into the surf. "Damned if I can read it though. Or see it half the time," and Edward's hand strayed to a worn bit of cloth tucked into his belt, a gesture Izzy wouldn't understand until years later, long after he'd decided to nurture this devotion to his Captain even if it wasn't sanctioned by the fates. The irony was that if he'd been a little less reverent, he might have demanded to see Edward's own mark, hidden on his back, and Izzy might have recognized the handwriting there; seen how the words perfectly matched his own.

But he did not. Izzy reclaimed his long-sleeved shirts, Edward never bared his back in public — fitting, for Blackbeard — and the two of them counterbalanced one another for years, content to settle for what the world had said they didn't deserve, but that they'd taken for themselves regardless. They were pirates, after all. They stole things.

Who needed Gods or fate with a sharpened blade at your side?

A decade later, two, two and a half, Izzy used that blade to cut open the shirt of a fancy-pants twat trying to steal his hostages. It didn't matter that the man was dressed in little finery, instead covered head-to-toe in the markings of the island, Izzy clocked him for gentry the second he opened his mouth, honeyed words trying to pass themselves off as threats. It stirred an old anger in him

and Izzy slashed that flouncy shirt into strips, destroying the fucker's symbol before (he thought) he'd set in on his face.

That was a lie.

If pushed, if asked — but no one ever asked — Izzy might have admitted that he was looking for a soulmark, some ravenous, masochistic part of him eager to see how the other half followed destiny. Surely the likes of Stede Fucking Bonnet would have some perfect script carved across his heart.

The flesh was unblemished though, devoid of scars, ink, or a soulmate's touch. Somehow, it made Izzy hate him all the more.

Stede remained a picture-perfect gentleman over the next few weeks, dressed in silk and cashmere.

He was picture-perfect when the British came for him, even while blubbering and begging for his life.

Picture-perfect while taming the Kraken, a kiss shared on deck that made Izzy seethe with something far more potent than rage.

In the end, he never did figure it out. Izzy Hands was proud of the pirate's education he'd garnered, a seaman's knowledge, an intimate understanding of one Edward Teach, but none of it was quite enough to put the pieces together. Or, perhaps, they *were* the pieces and Izzy couldn't see the forest for the trees. Regardless, it took a literacy lesson and the dredging of old memories for him to understand, one memory in particular still haunting him: when his arm had gone blank with refusal.

Or shock.

An equal, all-encompassing shock that anyone waited for him.

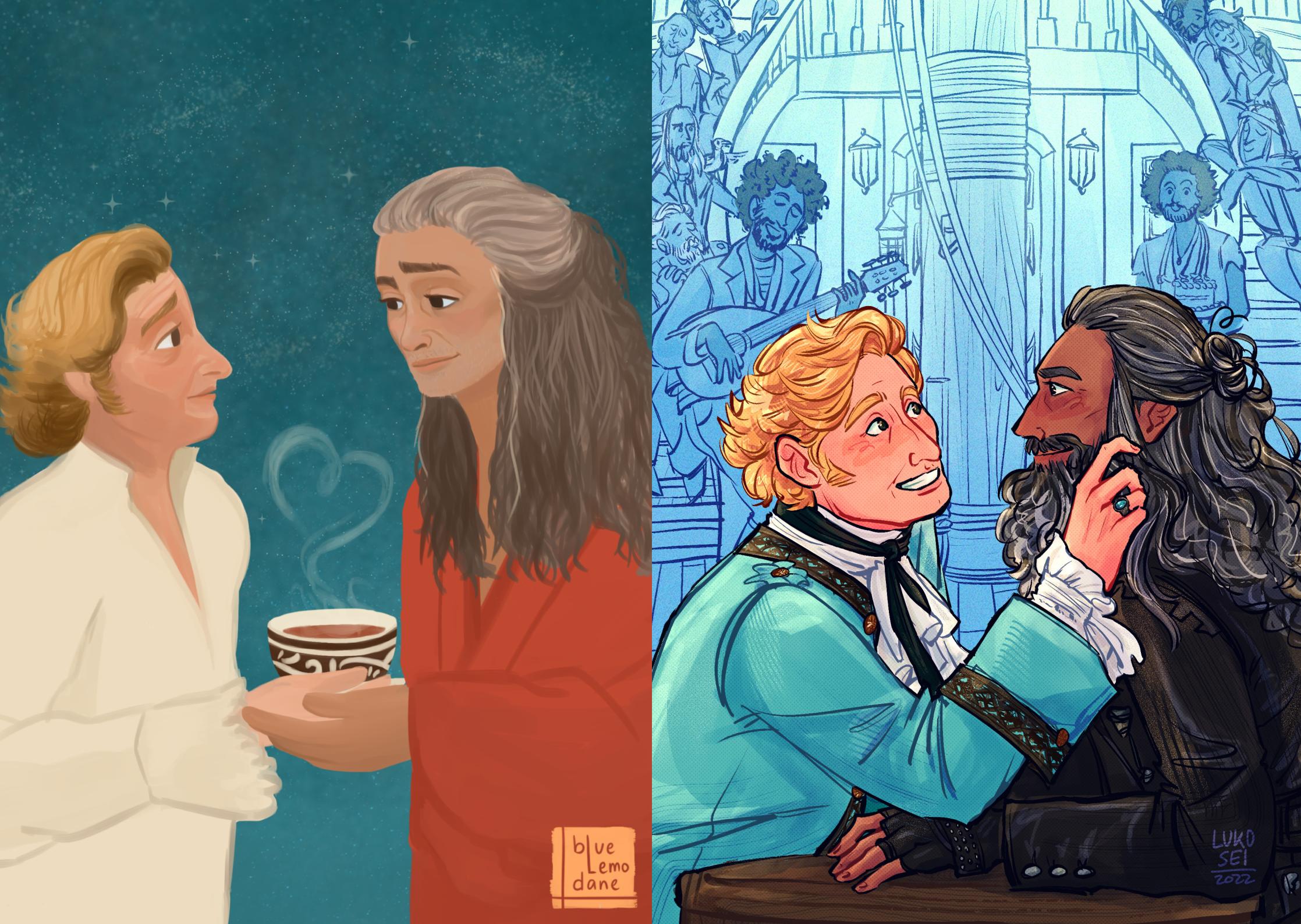
Izzy felt the same again when, for the first time, Edward wrote his letters with tongue between his teeth and they appeared first on Stede's cheek, then Izzy's neck.

They both removed shirts to reveal Stede's carefully inked alphabet gracing a back and an arm.

Then, numbly, Izzy picked up the quill for himself...

"Israel," Stede whispered, before Edward's name had faded away.





blue
Lemo
dane

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WATCH THE WORLD GO BY

ACE_DIN_DJARIN

no content warnings apply.

— ♀ —

He's grown a beard.

That's the first thing Mary notices. Stede had never worn any type of facial hair before; it would have clashed horribly with the fine fabrics and coats he was so fond of. But now he has a neatly trimmed beard and carefully curled mustache, and his usual extravagant wardrobe has been replaced by a flowing white shirt, simple green vest, and relatively plain breeches. To be fair, he *had* given up his fortune, and thus would not be able to afford his typical fashions, but there's more to him now than just decreased income. He seems... happy. More open. More at ease with himself. Even from a distance, Mary can see it.

They'd agreed to meet at a little gazebo tucked into a far corner of their land, surrounded by a mango orchard. Stede had had it built just after their wedding — Mary supposes it had been a romantic gesture, likely inspired by the tales of chivalry he loved so much. Neither of them had ended up using it much, and it had grown a bit dilapidated in the years since. Now, though, it seems bright and cheery, surrounded by golden mango blossoms.

Alma bounds forward, Louis trailing her more hesitantly, but still interested — Mary guesses it's mostly because of the man standing next to Stede, and not Stede himself. As much as the children had grown bored of playing pirates when they were younger, Louis now devoured any pirate tale he came across, always eager to hear more. And now — the man next to Stede certainly looks like a proper pirate. Curling, greying beard, tattoos running up and down his arms, decked out in leather — and a pistol hanging from his belt. He'd be fearsome, if not for the flowers tucked behind his ear, and the look of delight that crosses his face as he spots the children. Stede leans into his

space, speaking quietly, and suddenly it clicks.

"Hello there!" The man says brightly, and he immediately crouches down so that he's on an equal level with Alma, who pulls up short and eyes him critically for a moment, Louis peeking around her arm. "You're Alma and Louis, am I right?"

"Who's that?" Doug says in Mary's ear, so that she misses Alma's reply. She *doesn't* miss the bright beaming smile the man gives her children, though, or the hugs they eagerly give Stede when he opens his arms wide.

"That," Mary says in an undertone, waving when Stede turns to greet the two of them, "Is Stede's Ed."

— ♀ —

It's a proper little family that comes to meet them, in Stede's—but—not— anymore mango orchard. The kids, Stede has told him about — Alma and Louis, who run to meet them a few yards ahead of their parents. Mary and Doug follow a few paces behind, Mary with a truly massive basket hooked over one arm and Doug with a tiny bundle tucked against one shoulder. Stede's little gasp is loud in Ed's ear when he notices.

"Oh, they've had a baby!" He mutters to Ed, nothing but delight in his voice. Once, all Ed had felt at the thought of Stede's family was a terrible burning envy — now, he crouches down to meet the kids running up to them with a smile, sure in the feeling of Stede standing firm by his side.

The children are wary of him for all of a minute — after they take turns hugging Stede with apparent fondness, Alma turns to Ed and asks, "Are you a *real* pirate?"

He laughs. "I guess you could say that."

She nods, a crafty look in her eye, just like Stede gets when he's thought of a particularly good fuckery to pull off. Then Alma leans down, grabs a branch from the base of the tree they're standing by, and whips up again, pointing it at Stede like a sword with one hand thrown up in the air dramatically.

"Avast ye!" She shouts. "I'm the Dread Pirate Blackbeard!"

"Not yet, you're not!" a voice calls, and Ed chokes on a laugh as both children's faces — and Stede's — fall. "Introductions first, and *then* you can play pirates," Mary says, crossing the last few yards until she and Doug have

caught up to their group. She sets the basket down and immediately pulls Stede into a hug.

"Stede, you're looking wonderful," she says, and Ed's pretty sure she actually means it. Stede gives her a smile, one that reaches his eyes, nothing like the coldly polite smiles he gives people he doesn't actually like.

"Mary, Doug, it's lovely to see you!" Stede says, and reaches out to shake Doug's hand. "This is Ed." Stede's voice is fond; he wraps a hand around Ed's forearm, like a proper couple, and Ed sees Mary smile. They each greet Ed in turn, shaking his hand in turn. The baby in Doug's arms stirs, peeking out of the bundle of blankets and blinking at them all with very wide, very dark eyes.

"And who is this little one?" Stede asks.

"This is Artemesia," Doug says proudly, bouncing the baby slightly in his arms. It – she? – lets out a giggle. "Artie for short. She's about four months old now."

Ed blinks.

"She's named after the Italian painter," Mary explains. She seems to have caught the look on his face. Stede makes a little "ah!" of understanding. Ed nods along, mentally making a note to have Stede explain once they're back on their ship.

"Would you like to hold her?" Doug asks, and Ed glances at Stede, who's looking at Ed with an expectant look on his face.

"Oh — me?" Ed says, turning back to look between Mary and Doug. "I — uh, yeah, sure?"

He's not sure he's ever been asked to hold a baby before — he never had any siblings, and pirate ships aren't exactly the most family-friendly places. But he holds his arms out when Doug does, and tries his best not to drop the baby as she's settled into his arms.

Her eyes are even bigger up close — dark brown, the same color as Mary's, now that Ed is close enough to see it. Her hair is wispy, like a little dark cap on top of her head. She stares up at him for a moment, and then winds a chubby fist into his beard, and tugs.

Mary winces and reaches out to take Artie back from Ed, who's clearly trying his best not to shout as the baby yanks with considerable strength on his lovely long beard. To her surprise though, he smiles at her through a wince, and tightens his hold ever so slightly.

"She's got a good grip, this kid," Ed says. "She could give Wee John a run for his money."

Beside him, Stede laughs. Louis, who'd been watching their exchange with increasing impatience, pipes up, "Who's Wee John?"

Stede's face lights up. "He's one of my crew!"

The children immediately start pestering Stede for more information about his "*real, actual pirate crew!*" as Mary and Doug start laying out the picnic they'd brought with them. Ed listens with a small smile on his face, watching Stede.

The pirate talks continue through their meal, and eventually Ed is persuaded to give Artie back, though the face he makes when Mary gathers the baby back in her arms is honestly heartbreaking. Stede and the children soon distract him enough that he forgets, though — the four of them run off, finding sticks to wave around, shouting about being pirates. Mary sighs, cradling Artie, and glances at Doug.

"So," she says, watching Ed fall to the ground with a dramatic cry as Louis jabs him with his stick-sword, "What do you think of him?"

Doug hums, a small smile on his face. "I like him. He seems good for Stede."

That's the part that Mary keeps coming back to — the two of them are so comfortable around each other. Mary'd never seen Stede so relaxed in all their years of marriage. But here, out in the open with Ed by his side, he seems happy. Fulfilled.



The sun is setting golden and lovely over the sea by the time they say their goodbyes. They all exchange hugs and Stede gives many promises to write, amid the children's insistent pleas. Ed is bombarded with hugs that he, at first, seems bewildered by, but returns with enthusiasm after a few moments.

"You'll be safe, right?" Louis asks seriously, looking up at Stede.

Stede glances down the hill, towards the cove where his and Ed's ship is nestled, half-hidden from view. A few tiny figures are milling about on the

beach around it. Stede kneels down and wraps an arm around Louis, and points down toward the ship.

"You see the people there, around the ship?" He asks, and Louis nods. "Those are our crew. Our family. They'll keep us safe, I promise."

Louis nods after a beat of consideration. Stede hugs him again, and stands.

Mary watches Ed and Stede as they make their way down the slope, towards their ship. They're both smiling, and just before she turns away, back towards her family, she sees Stede reach out, and grasp Ed's hand in his.







SELINE
ABANTO
2022



OUTLIVING YOUR PETS AND OTHER UNPLEASANT THINGS

EYE

CW: animal abuse/death + child abuse.

— — —
Long time ago when Edward was not a Blackbeard yet, when he could not even grow a beard, he used to have a cat. It was a sick little thing. It was not even his cat per se; it was just an animal living probably in some gap under the roof of one of the sheds. But it sometimes came to Ed for scratches. And maybe Ed sometimes saved a few bites from an already humble dinner and shared with the animal when it looked extra thin. And also he possibly sneaked the animal inside a few times when it was raining outside.

Still, it was really not his cat.

It mattered little to none when his father caught him one time petting the stray. And he was angry and drunk (he was always angry and drunk) and he simply hated the idea of Ed having something nice so he decided to kill the poor thing. He caught it and no matter Ed's desperate pleas he beat the cat to death. And then he also beat Ed too just for fun. Just because he dared to try to have something nice.

And as much as Edward despises his father he did for once teach him a useful lesson. It is stupid to get attached to something. Especially to a thing that is fragile and helpless because no matter how hard you try there will always be moments when you cannot protect it. And so it is so much easier to save yourself the tears and not get attached to anything in the first place. He would have done better if he kicked the cat the first time it rubbed against his leg.

He was young and stupid. And he swore to never make that mistake again. That is where the rule of 'no pets on board' came from. It really is more merciful to kill it right away than to be looking over the shoulder for the entirety of the battle checking if the pet is alright. He does not want on his crew

anyone who would risk taking a bullet for some stupid animal.

Anyway, it all happened a long time ago. It has been a long time since Edward bothered to remember the existence of both his father and some stupid cat he might have cared about once. He has been quite happy leaving them forgotten. But some recent events have brought them back to his mind. To be more specific, the culprit is the latest fuckery and little talk of his newest... friend? (he could probably think of him as a friend? Stede himself told him that he considers himself to be his friend... Silly thing to call a fellow seaman. Pirates do not do friends.)

Stede does not belong here. In the life of a pirate the question of his death is never about 'if', it is about 'when'. There is good reason to always expect the next day to be the one to make an acquaintance with Davy Jones. And especially in the case of someone so inexperienced as the Gentleman Pirate, it is a miracle he is not dead yet. He is going to die really soon.

That one is certain.

And also it is none of Ed's business.

He knows he should leave. Oh, he really needs to leave. He is not ready to be there where Stede dies. He is not ready to be there when he will be about to die. He might do something incredibly stupid.

"Ed!" The source of all things troubling his mind on this fine evening interrupts him before he manages to set a deadline on when to leave for himself. As always. Not that it is that surprising – the ship is not that big after all and there really is not much to do with no other ships on the horizon to pursue. "What a lovely night isn't it!"

"It sure is, mate." He does not turn toward Stede Bonnet. The man still takes his answer as an invitation to sit next to him.

"Gazing at stars?" Edward only now notices that he has indeed been looking up. He would swear there were no stars when he sat down and got lost in his thoughts. How long has he been sitting here?

"I guess?"

"The sky looks so much bigger on the sea. The stars look so beautiful." Stede's leg bumps into his as he makes himself comfortable next to him. Edward never bothered to gaze at the stars for any other reason than to tell where they are and where to go. Stede of course has no fucking clue how to navigate a ship just by looking at the stars. However he is great at finding their shapes and telling stories about them. The guy is never short on some crazy

tale someone made up about a bunch of stars.

"You still remember what I was teaching about navigation?"

"Yes, of course it is..." Stede looks up and burrows his brows. He looks cute when he is thinking hard about something. "Erm... actually I might need a little reminder, maybe."

"Sure mate." Edward laughs, "But then you will tell me another of the stories about the constellations or whatever."

"That sounds like a fair exchange!" Stede nods. And so Edward leans closer to him so he can show him better what stars really matter and which he can ignore.

And maybe he could stay just a bit longer. He can enjoy him while it lasts. Just for a little bit. He will abandon him soon enough though. He will not stay long enough to do something stupid like trying to save him from certain doom. It is always a fucking stupid idea trying to take a bullet for your dog.







EDWARD TEACH, WED ON A BEACH

KYMERA219

no content warnings apply.

Stede didn't think he'd ever get married again, especially on a beach.

After the disaster that was his wedding to Mary, he was sure he'd had his fill of marriages. But after reuniting with Ed and working things out, he knew in his heart that he didn't want to spend his life with anyone else.

They decided to hold the ceremony in St. Augustine. Stede was against another seaside ceremony, but Ed had insisted on exchanging vows in a place where they'd shared their happiest memories.

Plus, Jim's nána agreed to officiate while overlooking the legalities of two men marrying each other.

"Hoist those branches! Weave more flowers onto that arch! I want this to look like a ceremony worthy of Blackbeard, not some cheap parlay in Tortuga!"

Stede looked on at Izzy yelling instructions to everyone with a hint of trepidation.

"Ed, darling," Stede whispered nervously into Blackbeard's ear, "was it wise to leave Izzy in charge of organizing the ceremony?"

"Probably not, to be honest, the man's completely bonkers," Ed said with an amused grin, "but he does know his way around a decoration."

The day of the wedding had Stede in more of a tizzy than usual.

As he adjusted the last few buttons on the overcoat that Wee John had made him, he hurriedly finished going over the final details with Lucius.

"Do we have the rings?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain. Jim is currently guarding them."

"And the Vows? Oh dear, how can one have a wedding if there's no vows — "

"Captain!" Lucius interrupted before Stede started hyperventilating. "Relax, it's all been taken care of. I've got your copy here and I've recited through Edward's with him."

"Thank you, Lucius," Stede breathes, relieved. "I can't imagine that was an easy task after what happened between you two."

"Understatement of the century," he muttered under his breath before facing his Captain with a smile that was a bit too tight, "It's just lucky that Fang saved me, isn't it?"

Stede was about to apologize for being the cause of that whole mess, but Lucius held up a hand to stop him.

"Anyways, enough of that. What's done is done and we've all worked hard to move forward," he said with a grin that was much more genuine, "Now how about we go get you married, Captain?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea."

There are many things Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach had been described as: killer, compatriot, most fearsome pirate in the seven seas, even twat.

This, though, would be the first time he could ever be called nervous.

He was standing under the archway with Izzy, waiting with bated breath for Stede to walk out. Jim was in front of them, going over the parts of the ceremony that their nána wasn't able to translate into English.

"Edward."

"Yeah, Iz?"

"There's still time for you to change your mind, sir."

"Izzy..."

"Relax, Cap'n, it's only a joke," he said when he noticed the look in Ed's eyes.

"As much as I hate to admit it... Stede Bonnet is actually good for you."

Well, he couldn't disagree with that.

Suddenly, everything got quiet and the guests stood up from their seats. Frenchie began strumming a whimsical tune on his lute as Stede appeared and started walking down the aisle.

Ed had never seen anything more lovely in his life.

Stede reached the arch and took Ed's hands into his own.

"You look absolutely wonderful, Darling," Stede murmured.

"You're not so bad yourself, mate," Ed said with a smile.

"Alright, save it for the honeymoon," Nana interrupted with a clap of her hands. "Let's get this wedding started."

With that, she launched into her speech, the Spanish going too fast for Ed to catch, while Jim narrated for everyone else.

"Dearly beloved rogues, scoundrels, and roustabouts, we have come together tonight to witness the partnering of Captains Stede Bonnet and Edward Blackbeard Teach," she began. "And, let's be honest, the free food and drinks," she added with a grin.

That earned a chuckle from the crowd, one quickly stifled by a look from Izzy.

"Stede, Edward," Nana addressed them both, "you are entering into a commitment born of love. Before these witnesses you are joining together, creating a union that involves both joy and responsibility. You must enter into your partnership with no lien on your ship nor crew...Bring forward the sword!"

Oluwande brought forward a rapier with a golden hilt, which Nana took and pointed between the two men.

"Do you both swear on this sword that there is no reason why your union cannot proceed?"

"I swear it." Ed stated at the same time Stede replied, "As do I."

She nodded and turned first to Ed.

"Will you have this man as your partner? Will you love him, comfort him, and honor him? Will you protect him, no matter who might board your ship and attempt to wrest him from you, as long as you both do live?"

"I do."

Satisfied, she directed her attention to Stede.

"Will you have this man as your partner? Will you love him, comfort him, and honor him? Will you protect him, no matter who might board your ship and attempt to wrest him from you, as long as you both do live?"

"I most definitely will."

"Alright, it is time to say your vows... you first, Blondie."

"Nana!" Jim hissed.

"It's alright Jim," Stede chuckled before clearing his throat. "I'll be glad to start."

"Edward, before I met you, my life was, well... a bit of a disaster. No one would respect me, or give the things I was interested in any thought. But you taught me the value of self-worth, and that it was okay to be exactly as I am. Thanks to you I am finally free from the chains of societal expectations, and I can never thank you enough. But what I *can* do is promise to love and cherish you until the sun no longer rises in the sky, and the winds have blown in our sails for the final time."

Ed had to temporarily let go of Stede's hand in order to wipe the moisture from his eyes.

"Wow that's uh... that's a pretty tough act to follow, mate, but I'll try my best." He took a deep breath. "I'm not the best of men by any means, but when I'm with you, I want to be better. So here is my vow: I promise to love and honor you, to make you laugh when you're feeling out of sorts, and to listen to you when you babble on and on about nothing in particular. I shall protect you from the elements and the elephants should we ever encounter them — as it is my understanding that they can be very large and unpredictable. I shall love you through scurvy and through fire, in wealth or poverty, whether you be near or far. When I speak of treasure, everyone within the sound of my voice shall know that which I am really speaking about is you. All of this I will undertake until there are no horizons left to chase and the rum is gone."

Not a dry eye was left on the shore after that. Before Ed could blink, Stede grabbed him and crashed their lips together.

When it was obvious that they weren't going to stop anytime soon, Nana simply threw her hands in the air and declared: "Guess they're married."

"I now pronounce you Captain and Co-Captain." Jim declared once they'd finally separated, "Three cheers for Blackbonnet!"

"HUZZAH!"

The crew and Nana proceeded to head over to the rectory where the reception was being held while Ed and Stede made their way further down the shoreline.

They'd join the others later... for now they were eager to have a little celebration of their own.





Captain Edwards.
Now, where is Blackbeard?

WHO the Hell
are you?!

BirdEyeBill's

WORN IN

MRMICH

no content warnings apply.

— ♀ —

Jim ran their fingers over the handle of their knife, tracing the familiar nicks by memory. Their knives were more or less interchangeable, except for the one that had their family name carved into it. That one had value, even if on the surface it was just like any other knife.

"Here," they said gruffly, shoving the knife they were holding into Oluwande's hand. "This is something you need to actually learn."

"Jim," Olu started, and Jim felt a little uncomfortable at the blatant fondness in his voice. It was nice, but they never really knew how to react to it. "I'm not the knife artist among us. I want to warn you ahead of time that this might end up in more than a few knives lost at sea."

Rolling their eyes at his words, Jim shrugged them off. They'd only been pissed off when they lost their second favorite knife in a fight without the time to recover it *once*. And, despite what Olu's raised eyebrows implied at the time, it was a perfectly reasonable thing to be angry about. Anyone would've been mad. "It's fine. I'm not expecting you to get it right immediately. And I'm not letting you anywhere near my favorite knives, just the shitty ones," they admit. "Now take the damn knife."

Oluwande held up his hands in a gesture of giving in, and took the knife from them, smiling that damned little smile. It made Jim's skin itch. They never wanted to stop seeing that smile though, so they ignored the itch and squared their shoulders, trying not to give any signals to put Oluwande off. Jim couldn't help the face they made at the way Olu held the knife though. It was fine enough to slash and stab, but that was the easy shit. If you wanted to really handle a knife, you had to know how to hold it *right*.

"Well, that works if you want to send it completely off target. If you want to actually hit what you're aiming at, you have to hold it like *this*." Jim adjusted Oluwande's grip on the handle, cupping his hand with their own, their fingers wrapped around his. He was so... warm. And alive. And this kind of physical intimacy was *not* something they'd planned on when they'd told Olu that they'd teach him how to properly throw a knife.

Now was as good a time as any. They were sailing to a new trade route, planning on ambushing a few merchant ships, but still several days away from it and not expecting any ships to cross their view of the horizon. The only unfortunate thing about having the relative free time was that the rest of the crew did too.

Jim spent a lot of their time not acknowledging them because that would mean having to face the absolute stupidity they engaged in, and it was fairly easy to tune them out, especially after they stopped having to be on guard about their disguise every hour of the day. The crew could even be a fun group of guys on occasion.

And drove them to feelings of murder on others.

Olu didn't even bother to disguise the humor in his voice. "They're betting on us, Jim."

Jim gritted their teeth. "Yeah. I know." They missed the silent, murderous mystique that they used to have. It usually kept the rest of the crew from speculating on them *in their goddamn hearing*.

"Well, *my* bet is that Jim just wants to hold his hand," Lucius called out from where he was standing a good distance away and half hidden behind the mast. Just far enough to be mostly out of range of any knives thrown, either unintentionally with poor aim or very intentionally with expert aim. Pity. "And this is a bet I expect I'll be winning," he added, a little louder.

There was a grumbling from the rest of the crew spread out among the deck, and a few more arguments about the bet, just low enough to make the details indiscernible. The rest of them were quieter than Lucius was, because Lucius was the only one with the balls big enough to say anything at or above a normal speaking volume.

"Lo juro por dios," Jim rolled their eyes upwards so hard their head followed suit, and they took a moment to wonder why the fuck they signed onto this ship in the first place. "Yes, Lucius, I want to hold Olu's hand. Also his knife throwing sucks and he should be better at it. The rest of you should be better at it too, if you call yourselves pirates."

"You're getting sweet on me, Jim," Olu grinned, teasing quietly so the rest of the crew wouldn't hear. He was a pain in the ass, but at least he was considerate about it.

"Are we all getting knife throwing lessons, Jim?" Frenchie called out, hiding a snicker behind his hand. "Are you going to teach me, too?"

"Fuck no." They couldn't even imagine the agony of teaching any of these idiots how to handle a knife properly. Jim was sure they'd already been much more competent than any of them when they started learning, and they were just a scrap of a kid back then. Any of these full grown morons? No way in hell. "Anyone who asks next is going to be volunteering as the target *¿esta claro?*"

Jim turned their attention back to Oluwande. "Just ignore them." They dropped their voice so only he would be able to hear them. "And I'm allowed to be sweet on you. You said we were family, if I wanted, and I've decided that's something I wanted. Now shut up and focus, I'm going to get you to be able to hit a target at least half reliably by the end of today. This is nonnegotiable."

"Yes, captain," Olu said, a clear bit of cheek in his voice. Jim side eyed him, but decided to let it go. It would be a futile effort to try to intimidate Olu out of his cheekiness; he already knew all their tricks and skills, and it wasn't even all that irritating. It should be though. It would have been if it were any of the rest of the crew, so they leveled him with a glare for good measure before turning their attention back to their knives.

"Now that you're actually holding it right, bring your arm back like you're about to throw it. Don't throw it yet, just let me see."

Oluwande did as he was instructed, and Jim shrugged. It wasn't perfect, but his form was functional, and perfection could come later. "Keep your elbow up," they instructed, "and then throw it at your target, following through. It's pretty simple."

"Jim... have you ever actually taught anyone else how to throw knives?"

"No," Jim said. "But this was how Nana taught me."

"Nana also taught you how to catch mice by hand, Jim."

"Just throw it, already. Go ahead and aim at the mast. If you don't hit it, you at least aren't likely to lose to knife overboard." Jim rolled their eyes at Oluwande, who rolled his right back with a smile.

The crew, who'd been listening intently with the hope of settling bets, and who were mostly scattered in the near vicinity of the mast, scrambled to get out of the way while also pretending like they weren't listening in.

"And the crew?" Oluwande asked with thinly veiled amusement.

"Dodging practice," Jim replied blandly. If only Olu saw the small smile curving at the edge of their lips, well, that was okay. "Go ahead and throw. It's only ten feet away."

Oluwande threw the knife. It went pretty far wide of the mark, clattering to the floor of the deck, but the throw was straight at least, and there was a decent amount of rotation to it – not too much and not too little. He had some promise; he'd probably never be a master at it, but Jim would make sure that he was good enough by their standards, at least. It was a handy skill to know, having saved both their lives on more than one occasion (even if Oluwande would argue that it also got them into as much trouble as it had gotten them out of).

Jim retrieved the knife, holding it out to Olu for him to take. Their fingers brushed against each other, and Jim couldn't help but marvel again at the warmth as both their grasps on the handle lingered, and Jim knew every scratch, every line of texture on all of their knives, made sure that they knew each one so they could use it effectively as an extension of themselves, but it felt a little different to them in this moment. Maybe it was just that Olu's fingers were bumping against their own, an unexpected touch interrupting what they expected to feel. It was an odd feeling.

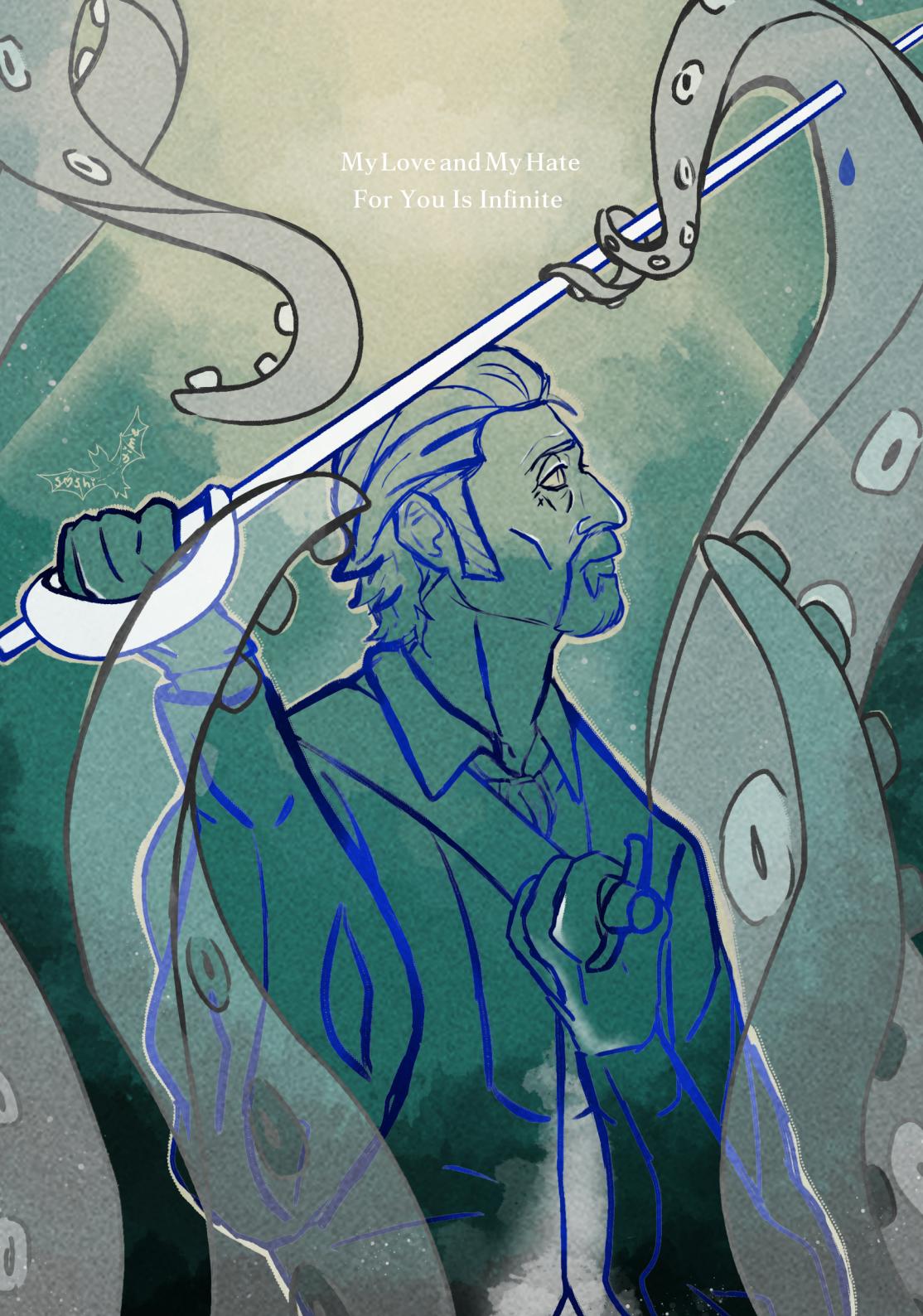
And even though it was odd, it... wasn't a bad feeling. Maybe just something to get used to.

"Again," they said, smiling wider.









My Love and My Hate
For You Is Infinite



PLAYING WITH HIS HAIR

ABBY ROSE

no content warnings apply.



It was late into the evening when the group returned from the party. Ed was beaming as Oluwande and Frenchie went to tell the others what happened.

“You were brilliant out there! Had them ripping each other’s throats out. I mean, the ship is still burning out there mate!” Ed didn’t know Stede could cause damage like that; it was brilliant!

Stede felt how hot his cheeks were as Ed continued to compliment him.
“Why, thank you.”

He nudged Ed, taking the moment to look over at the other man who was removing the purple coat. Stede made a mental note of how lovely purple was with Edward’s complexion as he looked out over the ocean.

Oluwande called out to the pair of Captains who were standing on the upper deck, “Captain, come over here; the guys have questions about the fight.” Stede looks toward Olu.

“Be over in a second.” Turning back to Ed, smiling softly, “Care to join us?” he asks, but could tell Ed was getting lost in thought.

He shook his head, “I’m good. Think I’m just going to enjoy the moon for a bit. Go have fun. You earned the right to be a storyteller after the chaos you started,” Ed said, giving him a reassuring smile.

“I’ll come find you later,” Stede promised, a hand brushing Edward’s arm as he moved back to the lower deck.

Ed took a deep breath as he leaned on the railing, his hand sliding into the vest and finding the familiar square of fabric with ease. Deep down Ed knew it was silly for a pirate to hold onto something sentimental for this long but

he couldn’t let go. Not of the memory of his mother and not of his old self.

He didn’t know how long he stood there holding the scrap of red silk as the waves shone with the moon’s reflection. “You’re right, mum.” he spoke softly, just letting his words catch in the breeze. “I’m just not that kind of person...” He worried at the fabric between his thumb and finger; lost in thought, not seeing Stede’s approach.

“I’m sorry tonight was a bit of a bust.” The words pulled Ed from his thoughts as he turned to look at Stede.

“No, no, mate, you were right... wasn’t ready.” He admits with a shrug, trying not to show the disappointment he felt from that truth.

Stede gave the other man a soft smile. “I think you’re very sophisticated.” He could tell something was bothering Ed but then noticed the bit of fabric he was holding. “Well, that’s a lovely piece of silk you have there.”

Ed makes a soft noise as he looks at the silk “This tatty old thing?” For Ed of course it was so much more but, for someone who came from money, Ed couldn’t fathom that it would actually be a nice item.

“Well, sometimes the old things are the best things.” Stede was smiling again as he reached out to Edward. Stede could tell that Ed was protective of the fabric. In fact he recalls seeing Ed hastily hiding it away before. “May I?”

Ed wasn’t sure what Stede was going to do with the silk but he knew Stede wouldn’t hurt it, and he trusted Stede with that part of him. So he let those nimble fingers take the fabric.

Stede could feel Edward’s eyes on him as he carefully folded the silk, moving a step closer before tucking the red silk into the breast pocket of Ed’s vest with a pleased smile. Taking a moment to admire the bearded man in the glow of the moonlight.

“There we go,” he said happily, watching Ed touch the pocket.

He was so gentle with it...

Stede felt this overwhelming warmth fill his chest as he watched Ed. Emotions like these were something he had only started feeling since Blackbeard joined his ship and right now was the strongest those feelings had been.

“Look at that... You wear fine things well.” As Stede spoke the truth, his heart swelled as their eyes met.

How the fuck was he supposed to react to that?! He wears fine things well?

Ed could feel his cheeks flush, his face heating up as he let the words sink in. He was smiling and nervous but a half laugh escaped his lips. Ed had this overwhelming urge to close the small gap between them and he made a small step into the space.

What was he going to do? Kiss Stede?? No. Shit. He couldn't do that. He didn't know him like that and he couldn't risk losing this.

Stede felt like he was on cloud nine just from this simple interaction. Seeing Ed flustered and at a loss for words made his heart flutter and the urge to kiss the other man filled his thoughts. For a moment he thought it was going to happen. Ed was shifting closer but then they both made soft sounds that could have been words.

"Night night." Stede spoke rather quickly but his body didn't want to move from this spot.

Ed nods, "Night, Night."

He still felt that urge to kiss Stede but instead, he lightly punched his arm.
Are you fucking kidding me? A punch to the arm, goddammit, Teach?

He turned to move for the area he kept his things, hearing Stede starting to walk for the Captain's quarters.

Stede stopped moving. He had a crazy idea. *Call out to him, invite Ed back to your room.* He turned to look over his shoulder, his heart swelling with joy when he saw Ed standing in the same manner looking back at him. "Ed?" He called into the space between them.

Ed smiled as their eyes met, "Yeah?"

Stede took a deep breath to calm the butterflies, "Join me? I can help you take your hair down before bed?"

Holy shit. This felt like a dream, Ed froze up for a second but then started nodding "Yeah... I mean..." He cleared his throat and smiled more. "I would like that." He moved across the deck and followed Stede as they ducked into the private quarters.

Stede smiled at the way Ed waited by the door.

"I'm going to change before we get the ribbons out. Would you like to borrow a nightshirt?"

Stede knew that could be a weird question but for him, sharing clothes with Ed just seemed normal and there was a part of him that hoped that if Ed got

comfortable enough maybe he would stay the night.

Ed felt himself blushing again at the question but nodded, watching Stede duck behind the divider. By the time Stede was changed, Ed sat on the settee wearing just his drawers and shirt, his bad leg stretched out.

Stede made a shocked sound at the sight before him. "Well, it seems you are quite comfortable already. " He tried to sound relaxed but his heart raced just from the sight before him.

Ed chuckled at Stede's reaction "So, you want to take this down??"

He didn't know how to admit it but Ed loved that Stede was interested in his hair, interested in time alone. It was all so new which made it even more exciting.

Stede grinned.

"I do!?"

He grabbed the hair products from the dresser, moving to stand behind Ed. Stede started with the flowers that decorated the bun. It didn't take long before his fingers reached the small piece of black ribbon holding up the salt and pepper hair. As the coarse hair fell, Stede realized he could spend hours just taking care of Edward's hair.

Ed let out a contented hum as he felt fingers combing through his hair as the bun fell. He couldn't help but lean into Stede's touch. He had felt hands on his body before, but this was intimate; it felt right, and the smell of the oil that Stede had just poured into his palm made the room smell of lavender.

"Trying to make me smell like you??" Ed asked, a content smile on his lips.

Stede beams "Maybe. I do like having you smell a bit like me," he admitted. It was easier to say these things when Ed couldn't see his face. "And this will help heal some of the damage the salt has done back here."

"Mhm," Ed sighed, pleased and comfortable as soft fingers worked from the base of his hair to rub against his scalp. Ed would never admit it but a moan left his lips when Stede focused on rubbing his scalp.

Stede was taken aback by the sound but didn't stop. In fact it just encouraged him to want to make this a nightly habit for the pair. "May I braid it??" He asked in a whisper in Ed's ear.

Ed nodded. "Can do whatever you want, Love."

Stede's heart flipped at the casual pet name. Was he Ed's love? Could Ed share those same feelings that he himself felt? Stede pushed those questions to the side as he plaited the hair in his hands. He had done this a few times for Alma so he hoped he could remember the proper technique.

Ed wanted to admit to Stede that tonight was shaping up to be the nicest night he'd ever had, but every time he thought about speaking he got distracted by the rush of... fuck...was that love he felt? All his brain was shouting was that he loved this man. It kind of scared the hell out of him but Edward so badly wanted to give into his thoughts. To take a hold of Stede's hand and give it a gentle kiss, show him how grateful he is to be there with him.

Before Ed had a chance to find his own words he felt Stede starting to tie off the braid... "Ed?" Stede spoke softly, not wanting to startle the other man.

"Yeah???" Ed asked, reaching back to touch the rope of his own hair.

"Would you...well, would you like to stay the night with me?" Stede asked in a rush.

Ed fully turned as he processed what Stede had said.

"Really???" While he had been hoping for this outcome, he wasn't expecting it.

"Well, I mean if you don't want to I understand but I just..." Stede huffed a little "Well frankly I would like it a great deal if you would stay with me."

Ed felt those walls around his heart falling and he reached out letting his hand cup Stede's cheek. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to kiss Stede, but he froze and didn't notice as Stede closed that small gap.

Stede caught Ed's lips with his own in their first kiss.

Ed felt it, at that moment, and he knew he was screwed. Stede Bonnet had officially won his heart. Stede had found that last bit of young Edward Teach that lived deep within Blackbeard and had pulled him to the surface.

This kiss marked a moment that meant their lives would never be the same again and both men would never regret that change.

"Of course, I will stay with you," Ed spoke against Stede's lips.

This was a promise that stretched further than just a simple shared bed for one night. It was the start of an entirely new world for both of them.





TANGLED (HEART)STRINGS

WRITING BY SADIE DALTON, ART BY FLETCH

no content warnings apply.

— ♡ —

Ed's not sure how he's found himself here. He's sat waiting in Stede's — well, Stede's and *his*, now, since the two of them have just recently dubbed themselves co-captains. So recently, in fact, Ed can still taste the brandy he drank while the two talked about it, can still feel his stomach full from the dinner they'd eaten just before. He's never had a co-captain before. He finds it perhaps more thrilling, and warming, than a vicious pirate like himself should.

He's sat waiting in his and Stede's quarters on one of the luxurious loveseats by the fireplace, fiddling with the tassels of the embroidered throw cushions that likely cost more than it did to raise him and trying not to let his heart beat out of his chest. He's not doing a very good job, and it's not like he's got his tough leathers to help keep the ticking thing in place; Stede had granted him free reign of anything he desired from either closet, even insisting upon the theft when he'd realized that the St. Augustine sweat trapped by his jacket and pants could give Ed a rash.

Ed supposes he should thank that sweat and the cloying, humid heat that caused it. It's what led him here. He's sat waiting in their shared quarters for Stede to come back from retrieving supplies to brush his hair with.

He nearly jumps when he hears the soft creak of the cabin door opening, barely having time to announce Stede's return before the other man is breezing through in a frenzy of energy. His arms are full and nearly overflowing, having brought combs and brushes of various sizes, textures, and even aesthetic styles, as well as a multitude of colored glass jars and bottles. No wonder Stede's hair is always so perfectly coiffed if he has such a sizable amount of equipment.

"Sorry for the wait, I just hadn't realized how many bits and bobs I had until I had to take them all out," Stede explains, huffing a self-deprecating laugh.

"S'okay, man. I think they're cool," Ed mutters, feeling uncharacteristically timid. He's not sure he's been this bashful in his life. Maybe because he's still reeling from his Lucius-induced wake-up call regarding his rapidly growing feelings for Stede; maybe because he's not sure he's been offered anything so tender since his mother gave him that stolen square of red silk. Maybe both.

His inner Blackbeard thrashes at the vulnerability of his position. What if Stede is luring him into a trap? What if he's going to slice off all of Ed's beautiful, hard-grown hair as some twisted trinket, or grab it in a firm grip and slice his throat open? Or, even worse, use that grip to turn Ed around, laugh cruelly in his face, and leave him with an invisible gash deep in his heart?

Ed takes a quiet but deep breath to steady his nerves. Stede is far too sincere — frequently to his detriment — to offer something like this and not mean it. If anything, Blackbeard would be the one luring Stede into a trap, not the other way around.

Stede lets out a pleased hum that Ed isn't sure he'd done on purpose and sets down all his things on the table in front of Ed. He arranges them in some mysterious order and sits down next to Ed, the cushions of the loveseat denting in some heart-wrenchingly domestic way that Ed never thought to even wish for.

"Alright now, how about you sit on your knees facing away from me?" Ed nods. His knee probably won't like it, but he's had it worse, and having his hair so sweetly tidied by a man like Stede — a man who inspires in Ed feelings he's never felt before — could be a worse distraction from the inevitable soreness.

Ed's about to move as directed when Stede stops him with a gentle hand on his arm. With only one of Stede's loose, breathable blouses covering him, the touch feels so much more sensitized. And distracting, as he only barely catches what Stede says next. "Hang on, that's not going to be comfortable, is it?"

Ed blinks for a moment, then scoffs. "It's not that big a deal, I'm used to little twinges here and there."

"Come on, now, that's just silly talk. This whole thing is about preventing you pain, Ed!"

Ed shuts his mouth, unable to come up with a response. His first instinct is

to protest — he's tough enough to withstand a little knee pain, coddling is for *babies*, and what if this is some sort of sugar-coated deception? — but then he remembers one of the golden rules of piracy: selfishness.

He grunts out his acquiescence and Stede claps his hands as he stands. "Now, how to place you..." He paces around the room, tapping his chin and muttering to himself, until he brightens in a comical "aha!" moment. He putters across the room and comes back with a plush, likely overstuffed footstool, setting it down right by Ed's feet on the floor. "There you go. You sit there, and I'll sit behind you, and hopefully it'll be the most comfortable for both of us."

Ed takes a seat on the footstool. He's just noting the surprising cushioniness of something meant only to prop up one's feet when he jolts in surprise at the feeling of Stede's thighs sliding to sit on either side of him. *They're warm*, Ed notes immediately, *and solid*. He thinks he might like to rest his head on them sometime, curling up into Stede's lap like a sleepy cat.

He tenses in alarm at the thought, and Stede seems to take that as an indication of disapproval. "Sorry Ed, is this too awkward of a setup? It is a rather, erm, intimate sort of arrangement, I hadn't even realized — "

"No, no, you're great — this is great. Just relax."

Stede huffs a laugh. "I feel like I should be telling *you* that."

Once the two have settled enough, Stede taps his shoulder lightly before gently removing the tie holding up Ed's half-up hair bundle, having to wrangle apart some clumps before it all falls around Ed's shoulders and back. He then reaches over and grabs one of his wide-tooth combs and brings it up to Ed's hairline, tapping his shoulder again before he sets the comb into Ed's hair and begins steadily running it through.

When Ed had imagined the niceness of having his hair combed, he'd imagined it being largely for emotional reasons — letting himself be taken care of, sharing vulnerability with someone he thinks he might just be in love with, etcetera etcetera. He hadn't been entirely wrong, but he failed to take into account the way each scrape of comb to his scalp makes his spine completely *melt*. He lets out a satisfied sigh as the comb drags smoothly through a section of hair, somehow the perfect mix of scratching pressure and gentle restraint, each stroke unwavering in their pace. A few times Stede glides the comb along the underside of Ed's hairline, grazing along the scalp there and causing tingling goosebumps to rise in waves down Ed's shoulders.

INTROVERT TIME



He hadn't expected such measured tending from someone like Stede, either; Stede usually has such a nervous energy about him. He's always chatting aimlessly, flitting around whatever room he's in like a hummingbird looking for a stable place to land. It appears he's finally found it, because Stede is so calm and quiet, so sure of every stroke he makes. Ed's never seen this side of Stede before. He finds it stunning.

Of course Stede would find his zone in hairdresser's work, the fussy man. It makes Ed's heart swell with fondness.

Soon, Stede manages to detangle all the snags and switches out his wide-tooth comb for a fine-tooth one instead, running it back again through all of Ed's hair. By now, Stede's combing rhythm has lulled Ed into a syrupy daze, his whole posture slack and his breathing slow. He can't remember the last time he'd felt so at ease; being a pirate, especially one like Blackbeard, doesn't allow for much peace and relaxation even in sleep.

"Your hair has such a gorgeous texture, do you know that? It's a shame that Izzy and Lucius were the ones to do up your hair for that French party the other week." Stede whispers.

Ed only hums in response, his insides liquid.

He only notices Stede has finished with the fine-tooth comb when he registers faintly the clink it makes when Stede returns it to the table. Stede then places his hands on Ed's shoulders, their weight filling some previously undiscovered hole in Ed's chest, and sweeps them gently back and forth. Ed gets the impression Stede only half-notices what he's doing. "Do you think... Do you mind if I touch your hair a bit? Perhaps apply some lavender hair oils, if you'd like?"

Despite his languid, sleepy state, Ed nods immediately. He's eager to give in to his newly-born catlike fantasies of head scratches and naptime, and lavender has lately become one of his favorite smells. Whether that has to do with Stede and his endearingly innumerable hoard of soaps is irrelevant.

Stede squeezes his shoulders for a brief pulse before reaching over to grab one of his many jars and crack it open. Ed's eyes flutter closed as the pleasant scent reaches his nose, and Stede's blunt fingertips follow shortly after, digging lightly into the scalp near his hairline and beginning the meticulously satisfying journey down Ed's freshly combed mane. He feels like he's floating on a lavender cloud, weightless, comfortable, and without a worry in sight. He's so lost in his silent, tranquil headspace, only paying attention to the feeling of Stede's fingers in his hair, that it takes him a moment to realize

he's drifting backwards into the edge of the loveseat — and Stede's lap.

Surprising himself, he finds he doesn't feel an ounce of shame, even when he tilts his head to the side to rest it on one of Stede's thighs. He'd been right earlier in thinking they would be an excellent place to rest.

Stede chuckles softly. "Tuckered out, are we?" He sets his hands on Ed's shoulders again, squeezing this time. Ed wishes desperately he could purr. "I suppose that's enough for tonight. Let's get you to bed."

Stede pushes Ed lightly forward until he can balance on his own. Ed immediately slumps forward, bones having gone to sleep already, and Stede tutts at him before standing and hoisting Ed up by his armpits.

"Ough, Ed, come on up now — gosh, you're a tad heavy —" Ed flops down gracelessly onto the couch and immediately tips to the side to land his head on a throw cushion. Stede putters around for a blanket and tosses one over Ed, and it's quite possibly one of the softest things he's ever felt, and the loose vulnerability of the night coupled with the touch of the material might've brought him to tears if not for his drowsiness.

Faintly, he feels Stede caressing his cheek lightly before moving through his hair one last time. He thinks he feels Stede's lips grazing his forehead, but he's not quite sure if it was real or an idyllic, lavender-scented dream.





MARA

@maravanh

WHEN HE COMES

SARAH ROSALES

no content warnings apply.

The moon shines just as brightly as the night that he tucked away your red silk patch into your chest pocket. The water is gentle in its rhythm as you prepare the dinghy for your escape. With millions of starry eyes, the sky watches you closely, and the trees whisper of your flight to freedom in the passing breeze. When he comes, you'll be ready with a boat full of supplies, and arms wide enough to carry him into the world beyond.

Your body still feels the ghosts that hug around it — his soft hands on your calloused ones, rubbing at the edges and the valleys between your knuckles. Your lips still remember the kiss that could settle storms. At your age, you shouldn't feel giddy, but that thing in your chest flits about like a frantic hummingbird. For once in your damned life, hope lights up inside you like hundreds of suns fighting to burst through.

When he comes, it will just be the two of you, nothing more than Edward Teach and Stede Bonnet. Nothing else exists beyond the shape of him — no navy out to get you, no crew looking at you with expectations higher than heaven, no darkness, and no kraken. That dinghy could take you to China or India or the Americas for all you care, but you'll finally be able to leave it all behind. The greatest gift he's given you is helping unravel that heavy dark shroud that Blackbeard wore. He only saw Edward, his closest friend. Your mind cannot remember the last time somebody saw you as an equal and not as walking cruelty and all things wrong in the world.

The night brightens, and your head finds itself resting on your arms. He'll come, he has to. When he does, you think you'll tell him of the love tangling itself in the spaces between your ribs. You never learned how to make room for it, never learned how to cradle it into something easy and presentable.

You locked it away all these years, and only now are you brushing off the dust and dirt.

Oh, if your mum could see you now. You want to show her how even if you were not born for fine things, you can make yourself to be. You wish you could tell Izzy that you can still find something holy to hold onto amidst all the ruthlessness.

The sun rises, and rays break through the clouds. Maybe he lost his way, maybe the guy you told to wake him didn't shake him hard enough. You check the dinghy and the supplies once, twice, and a third time just in case. A patient sigh escapes your lips. Every rustle of the trees behind you feels like a teasing ghost. Any moment he could be there, yelling "Ed" in the way that makes you think that you are worthy of his gentleness.

When he comes, he will find you waiting on that solitary pier with a smile so joyous, so wide, he'll think that you just found home, after centuries of never being allowed to.





The Small
Blue



EUPNEA

MICHAEL H.

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Stede Bonnet is a bloody fucking marvel.

Ed thought he knew all about pirates, knew how this whole life of plundering and pillaging was supposed to work, but he was wrong.

And that *elates* him.

Because now he's standing on a ship with more polish and paint than he's seen on most party vessels, and it's a fucking *pirate* ship. With carpets! And books! And a captain who has a little room full of satin and cashmere off the side of his personal bloody cabin! It's ridiculous.

It's *wonderful*.

Stede Bonnet is a bloody fucking marvel, and Ed can't get enough of him.

It's the little things that captivate him, at first. When he's done soaking up the *newness* of it all, it's not the silk robes or the tinkling chandeliers that fascinate Ed, but the way Stede smells like soft flowers, and the way his smooth fingers are sticky in the morning when he passes Ed something over breakfast, marmalade not quite licked off, his knuckles moving like a delicate... Something. Ed's not sure what, actually. He hasn't seen enough delicate things to compare.

Stede's just like that, though; incomparable. Whenever Ed thinks he's figured him out, he'll surprise him with something else, eyes bright and crinkling like two shining stars.

Fuck.

Ed doesn't know how he does that, all the way out here. He doesn't know how he stays so *soft*. Ed's crew definitely wouldn't allow it — not with *their*

Blackbeard — but Stede's does.

Maybe it's because they're soft, too, in their own ways. Ed's watched them (purely for tactical reasons of course), so he's *seen* things; things that fascinate him and make his heart skip; things that make him wonder if people can all be like this, like them.

Jim, for instance, is so quiet you can hear the whisper of hair against their neck when they move. And when they smile? Ed would be surprised if it *didn't* make someone's stomach flip. And when they hold a knife, the tendons in their hands flex like a dangerous instrument, a captivating tautness in them that begs the onlooker to watch for the sharp release. It always comes, with a cutting zing of metal, and — if enough rum's been had — a laugh. That might be Ed's favorite part; Jim laughs like joyful waves hitting the shore.

Roach is the mastermind behind the long pink scar across Jim's chest, a happy mark. Ed remembers how fiercely Roach showed it off when it was healed; gesturing to Jim with wild pride at every opportunity. He loves showing off his work like that, no matter how big or small, pointing and prodding at marked skin. That's Roach though; hands always skittering to touch and hold. But Ed doesn't mind. Roach's clothes smell like citrus and oil, and he's got spices stuck under the edges of his nails, and Ed finds his voice quite pleasant, actually, so he doesn't mind.

God. There's so *much* to find pleasant aboard *The Revenge*, though.

Oluwande has rounded knuckles, and he peels oranges for Jim like they're a love letter. When he smiles his teeth flash out from under full lips and Ed thinks he gets why Jim likes kissing him so much. He has a face that rests in such a way that you can't help but take in how his chin smooths up into the planes of his cheeks and ears, and god. To be the earring that kisses his neck...

Frenchie has calluses and scars on the tips of his fingers where they pluck out melodies. His laugh makes him wobble like he's drunk, and it invites people to steady him, to throw their arm around his shoulders like they're best mates, and then, well... they *are*. Happened to Ed that way. Frenchie also bites his lip, and taps rhythms when he walks, and mumbles lyrics to himself when he thinks no one'll notice. But Ed does. He notices everything.

Buttons is a sheer fascination. His eyes are stark and fierce and strange, and he stares at the sea like he knows it deeper than any being alive. His palms are dry and rough and shiver when they touch things, like everything holds too much awe, and he leaves bits of dried fish out for the birdies, humming quiet tunes to them when they come to roost. Ed's heard him once or twice.

He always stops to listen.

The Swede has holes in his teeth that whistle when he laughs, like a flute, and his hands are surprisingly gentle; these fluttering, sweaty little things that summon butterflies from under the ribs. He collects odds and ends, too, pressing them into people's palms in passing — a collection of idle thoughts — and Ed's kept every single one he's been given.

Wee John has big hands, warm and steady, and words twist nicely under his accent. When he smiles, everyone does the same, a bright, infectious lightness carried in his full cheeks. Ed gets caught, sometimes, on the inky cluster of stars by his brow, watching as they tighten when he concentrates. Whether he's tying a rope, or poking designs onto the crew's skin, there's an intimacy in known flesh that captivates him.

Lucius carries himself like a bird; fluttering, preening. He laughs like one also, not light, but loud and shrill in gasps of mirth, and it's fantastic. He's got nice hair, too, since he washes, but the edges of his nails and the bumps of his wrists are always darkened with ink; too stained for water. And his neck smells like perfume. Ed doesn't know what it is, whether it was loot, or a gift, or if some people just smell like this, but what he *does* know, is that Lucius smells rich and sweet when he passes, and that the scent is pressed into every page of Stede's journal.

It's on Black Pete, too. When he pulls off his shirt on hot days, Ed can smell it from across the deck, watching as he scratches at his sunburns. The pink is peppered over his shoulders like smeared kiss marks, splotchy and white, a testament to his time at sea. And his tongue whistles when he speaks, and laughs, and says the word "sweetie," like it knows how wonderful each sound deserves to be. Ed likes listening. He likes so much of it, of them, of the softness here.

And then there's Stede.

Stede, who smiles so often it's etched into his face.

Stede, who covers his mouth when he laughs over dinner.

Stede, whose eyelashes flutter when he's so tired he has to lean on Ed to walk.

Really, when Ed looks at the whole picture, of course Stede is like this. He's surrounded every day by people with so much to love who let those things *be* loved.

But Ed's not like that. Affection was scrubbed from his skin years ago by too much blood and whiskey. It's not his place here, with the velvet things, and

the off-kilter heat of arms slung around each others' waists. That was never meant for him.

He doesn't know how to say that though, to Stede. Every time he opens his mouth to he just ends up saying yes to some new, fucking fantastic thing that takes hours to untangle himself from.

It takes almost a month before the words find their way out of Ed's throat. He's sitting with Stede in his cabin, on the little couch thing that makes him feel like he's sitting on a bloody cloud. It's late. They talk a lot when it's late, Ed's not sure why. Maybe they just never stopped, after the night in the look-out. Stede's certainly still bright enough to be his lighthouse.

Shit.

He's been trying to avoid thoughts like that. Makes this whole mess a lot harder to execute when he's thinking shit like that, doesn't it? Shit that Stede would probably say, and mean, and that Ed would *like*.

His face flushes and he quickly takes a deep swig of rum, focusing on the way *that* heats his cheeks instead. That's all the bottle's turned out to be good for, anyway.

Ed initially brought it to share, in hopes that it would make things easier — remove the mushy part of his brain and let the words fall right out — but instead all it's done is make things too buzzed and loose for any words to form at *all*. Well... that *and* bring him halfway close to feeling like some poor bloke weeping at a bar.

It's frustrating.

It's pathetic.

As if to prove his point, Stede smiles, and Ed's stomach twists in a weird, warm, way, and he glares witheringly down at the bottle.

Just gotta get it over with mate, he reminds himself. *Rip off the leech.*

"Hey Stede?"

"Yes?" Stede looks up from the book he was reading (poetry, Ed thinks, but he stopped paying attention).

"I don't think... I really fit here? With you guys?" It wasn't meant to be a question, or to sound nearly as unsure, but it comes out as both anyway. His fingers tighten on the neck of the bottle. God he hates talking about this shit.

Stede's brow furrows and he shifts to face Ed. "What do you mean?"

"I dunno 'm just..." *I'm not good enough for this*, would be the honest answer, but he's got a feeling Stede would have something to say to that. "I don't think I really have the same stuff, you guys do." Stede raises an eyebrow, and wow, yeah, bloody *fantastic* prose on that one, Teach. Ed grunts, frustrated, and sits up straighter. "Like—" he scrubs a hand down his face, "like all the bits, the nice bits in all of you."

"Nice bits?" Stede looks like he might laugh, and maybe Ed wants him to. Maybe he wants him to so he can be pissed instead of wanting to drag him over by the collar and feel the softness for himself.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, his words aren't fucking working!

"Yeah the fuckin' nice bits!" he yells, and Stede startles. "The—the nice way you smile or the way the Swede tilts his head when he laughs or how Frenchie has that little fuckin' freckle thing right on his knuckle or—or how Lucius always straightens my neck thingy if I've got it on crooked, the fuckin'—!" The hand that was gesticulating wildly freezes. He searches for words, but they're gone again. *Fuck*.

"The fuckin' nice things!" he spits finally, arm falling with limp exhaustion into his lap. "The things I don't..." his voice catches. *Shit*. "The things I don't have."

There's a beat of silence, and then the warm weight of Stede's hand presses onto Ed's.

"Oh darling..." he whispers, "of course you have those things."

Ed glances up at him and *shit* when did he start shaking? But Stede just smiles, scooting closer, and carefully removes the bottle from Ed's hand, setting it somewhere on the floor.

"You've got kind eyes," he says after a moment, and Ed's breath stutters in his throat. "And this right here?" His fingers push under the hem of Ed's shirt, brushing over the cluster of scars peppered his stomach. "Oh, why this is like a little sunburst! A little congregation of stars." Stede smiles at that, his eyes tracing up Ed like he's a marvel. "Oh and of course," he pushes him back a bit, hands held firmly on Ed's biceps, "you really do have the *finest* arms."

Ed laughs, breathy and wet, and pushes gently at Stede's hand. "Stop it mate, you're gonna make me blush."

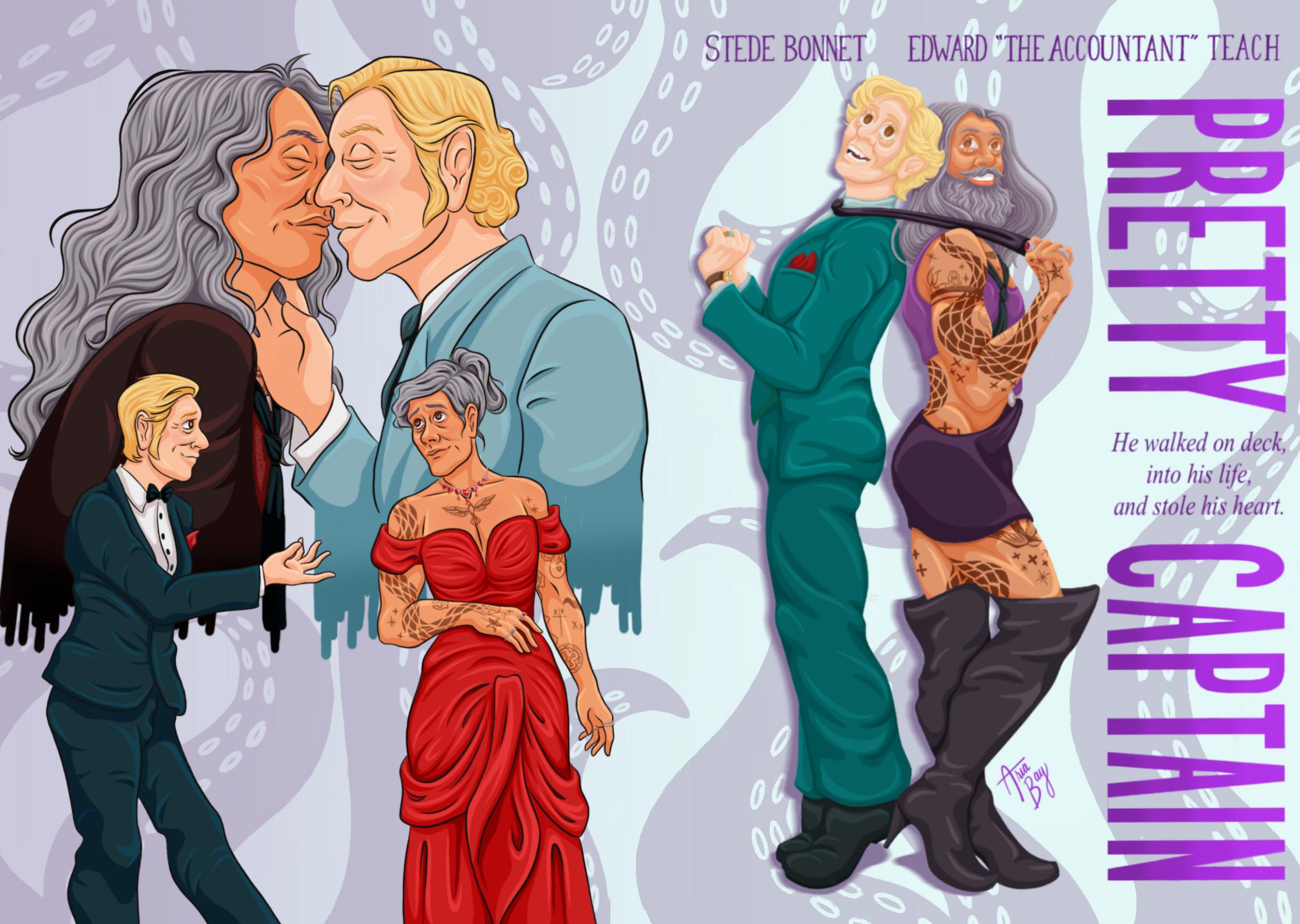
Stede beams, like that's just what he wanted to hear, and gathers up Ed's hands like they're buried treasure.

"You're amazing with a sword and your navigation ability astounds me. You have the loveliest voice and your fingers fit just perfectly around the handle of a teacup. You look lovely in purple, and black, and really anything I couldn't pull off, and I think perhaps—"

And Ed kisses him then, suddenly, fingers jerking from Stede's grasp to cup desperately at his face and yank him in. There's no thought to it, none, just a need, deep, and shaking, and resonant.

His hands slide into Stede's hair, the man sighing against his lips, and Ed thought he knew how breathing worked, how air was supposed to feel in his lungs, but he was wrong. It's only here, and now, drowning in the softness of Stede Bonnet and his bloody fucking marvelous crew, that Ed catches his first real breath, and finds how much his chest has ached for it.





STEDE BONNET

EDWARD "THE ACCOUNTANT" TEACH

P
R
E
T
T
Y

*He walked on deck,
into his life,
and stole his heart.*

C
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LYCHEEON



“THE GREATEST TERROR OF THE SEA”: THE PREVALENCE OF THE MYTH OF BLACKBEARD IN OUR FLAG MEANS DEATH

DELACROIX

CW: mentions of rape.

1. INTRODUCTION: HOW TO STUDY PIRATES

A natural reaction to fiction that is based on or claims to represent the past is to wonder how much of it is historically accurate. With characters who are wrapped in myth and mystery, but otherwise known to have really existed, *Our Flag Means Death* is no exception.

In the field of piracy, separating fact from fiction is particularly challenging, both for creators and spectators. In fact, Captain Charles Johnson's *General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates* (1724) — the source par excellence for the lives of pirates (Cordingly xx) — “is generally considered a reliable source” only partially, since the author takes a series of creative licenses (Kuhn 2–3). However, there has been an increasing interest in pirates not as historical individuals but as mythical characters, to the extent that “no book on piracy can ignore this legendary dimension, which continues to influence our attitude to the facts and to govern our responses to them” (Lucie-Smith 7). In other words, when studying any representation of pirates, myth is as important as history.

Bearing this in mind, this essay seeks to address the representation of pirates in *OFMD*, not from the perspective of historical analysis but through the lens of myth. Following claims that Blackbeard was “largely responsible for the image of the pirate which became popular over the years,” the arguments will focus both on the *Our Flag Means Death* character and the real-world myths (Cordingly 13). The objective is first, to delve into the myth of Blackbeard, and second, to observe how the extent to which the character of Edward Teach in *OFMD* is shaped by his interaction with this myth.

2. BLACKBEARD: BUILDING THE ARCHETYPAL PIRATE

As with other famous pirates, most of the information regarding Blackbeard is taken from Captain Johnson's accounts. This volume may at times be an inaccurate historic source but for the task at hand, it is ideal: as Edward Teach's first biographer, Johnson's portrayal “would remain equally vivid to later generations of readers”, thus contributing to establishing the myth of Blackbeard (Konstam 4; Cordingly xx).

According to Johnson, in Blackbeard's first months at sea, his behaviour is that of a typical pirate: he indulges in alcohol and plunders ships. At times, he's implied to be even milder than others, as he regularly spares men's lives (Johnson 47). Additionally, Blackbeard is depicted as having a restricted sense of loyalty: at one point, he secured “the money and the best of the effects for himself and some others of his companions he had most friendship for” and then abandoned the rest of his company (Johnson 49). In contrast, in the narration of his second and last year, Blackbeard's description is veiled in brutality: from prostituting the sixteen-year-old girl he had forced into marriage, to shooting Israel Hands in the leg leaving him permanently disabled, because “if he did not now and then kill one of them, they would forget who he was” (Johnson 50–59). Occasionally, Johnson concedes that he could be generous, offering presents to both sea people and planters “when he happened to be in a giving humour” (51–52). However, he points out that Blackbeard also “took what he liked [...] knowing well, they dared not send him a bill for payment” and raped the wives and daughters of the planters (51–52).

Interestingly, Johnson's descriptions reveal Blackbeard's agency in creating his myth: he describes him as extravagantly wicked, “as if he aimed at making his men believe he was a devil incarnate” (61). He goes on to explain that his moniker, Blackbeard, played an important role in creating that image:

He was accustomed to twist it with ribbons, in small tails, after the manner of our families wigs, and turn them about his ears. In time of action, he wore a sling over his shoulders with three brace of pistols hanging in holsters like bandoliers, and stuck lighted matches under his hat, which, appearing on each side of his face, his eyes naturally looking fierce and wild, made him altogether such a figure, that imagination cannot form an idea of a fury, from hell, to look more frightful. (Johnson 60)

This leads to the conclusion that Blackbeard's devilishness, although convincing, may just be an act: Johnson explains an anecdote in which his crew genuinely believed that the Devil was walking with them as another member

of the crew (61). The tricks worked not only with the crew, but also with the general public: the Jamaican Leslie Charles described him as “one of a most bloody disposition and cruel to brutality. His name became a terror” (202).

In short, the image painted by Johnson is that of a Blackbeard with volatile humour and a propensity to violence (60). Nevertheless, it is implied that he was prone to performance so ultimately, it is impossible to know whether he was genuinely wicked or was just engaging in some sort of psychological manipulation. He was, in a word, a mysterious man.



3. EDWARD TEACH: THE MAN BEHIND THE MYTH

As aforementioned, the popular image that was initiated by Captain Johnson's account is of great importance in Blackbeard/Edward Teach's narrative arc in *Our Flag Means Death*. In particular, this essay argues that his narrative goes through four stages that are marked by Edward Teach's relationship to the myth of Blackbeard: mythification, dependence, emancipation and retirement.

In the initial stage, mythification, the audience is introduced to Blackbeard exclusively as a myth. Presented only under the moniker of Blackbeard, Pete paints a picture that is very similar to Captain Johnson's: he appears as a supernatural, inhuman and devilish creature. The idea that Blackbeard is fearsome is repeated as the episode progresses. To begin with, he's implied to be extremely violent — even slaughtering children —, much like the legendary Blackbeard. Additionally, his quartermaster, Izzy Hands, evokes the relationship that the captain had with his crew in Johnson's accounts, by indicating that “the man is half insane” (*Our Flag Means Death*). This contrasts with the first time the audience properly sees Blackbeard: with his face hidden, whatever is revealed about the person behind the legend is almost restricted to his voice and gestures, which are surprisingly mild. As a result, even before the audience is finally allowed to observe the legendary Blackbeard completely, it is implied that the myth's veracity is dubious.

This appearance marks the second stage, dependence, in which the double realities of Blackbeard/Edward Teach coexist. The character shows a simultaneous divergence and convergence from the myth: on the one hand, he charms the crew in moments and nurses the injured Stede; on the other, he toys with the idea of suicide and reacts violently when the crew doesn't line up immediately, which more closely matches Johnson's tale. These contradictions in characterization are explained in the show by his introduction

to Stede as Ed, rather than Blackbeard: Edward Teach and Blackbeard are different things. It is revealed that Edward is rather dissatisfied with the myth of Blackbeard, as it has robbed him of the thrill of piracy. What is more, he intends to ‘kill’ Blackbeard so that he can escape the constraints of the legend. As preparation, he tries his hands at pageantry. But both the French captain and the high classes receive him with disdain and mockery, to which he reacts with murderous violence, just as Blackbeard would. Much like the Blackbeard in Johnson's biography, there is the risk that if he does not behave violently occasionally people may not respect him. In other words, he depends on the myth to deal with rejection and “wasn't ready” to give it up yet.

As he delves into the third stage, emancipation, Edward starts to let go of Blackbeard, by revealing the tricks behind the creation of the myth, namely, the ‘art of fuckery’. This change is met with Stede's positive reinforcements, which contrast with Izzy's negativity: Stede praises Edward's brilliance while Izzy reminds him of his identity as Blackbeard, easily manipulating him. These two antithetical reactions are what drive Edward's development, as Izzy's encouragement to engage in murder despite Edward's desires, clashes with Stede's compassion and reassurance when he reveals the poor image he has of himself. But symbolically, in Izzy and Stede's duel, it is the positive reinforcement that wins. Without constant demands to adhere to the myth of Blackbeard, Edward gradually acts according to his desires. For instance, though initially concerned about being seen treasure-hunting, he ends up engaging just to make Stede happy. The problem in this stage is that Edward's attitude remains passive: he does not intervene in the duel, symbolically showing his willingness to be swayed by other people's choices. It isn't until he actively chooses Stede over Calico Jack, that Edward regains control over his relationship with his myth.

Now in the fourth stage, retirement, Edward has power over his interactions with the myth. With this agency he decides to ‘retire’ as Blackbeard, symbolically shaving his beard. By this point, Stede's kindness has created an environment welcoming enough for Edward to explore an identity independent of Blackbeard. Precisely because of that support and safety Stede has represented, his absence at the beach is all the more devastating. Edward interprets this as a rejection, and without the Blackbeard persona to help him deal with it, he initially relies on the comfort of the crew. But then Izzy confronts him with a picture of his mythical self and openly rejects whoever Edward may become in favour of Blackbeard. Without Stede, the crew does not offer enough safety to balance and defeat Izzy's negative reinforcements.

Ultimately, this explains why the character falls back in a position that he finds disagreeable: Blackbeard is familiar enough that it promises some acceptance, while Edward grants him nothing. In this way, Edward goes back to the second stage, in which he depends on Blackbeard to perform in the public sphere, while in the private one his suffering continues.

In conclusion, Edward's character development can be imagined as a circle that is drawn around Edward's relationship to the myth of Blackbeard. First, we are shown a purely mythical Blackbeard, followed by the revelation that Edward the man depends on Blackbeard the legend for psychological survival. Then, Edward embarks on a process of gradual emancipation that will culminate in his retirement as Blackbeard. But when faced with rejection, Edward returns to the second stage, dependence, showing that Blackbeard may be as hard to kill as his myth foretells.



4. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to assess whether *Our Flag Means Death* offers a historically accurate depiction of Blackbeard. This is in no small part because the real Blackbeard's persona is so surrounded by mystery and legend already, that it is hard to distinguish fact from fiction. Nevertheless, the show does offer an interesting commentary about the way a myth may condition the personality and mental state of the person associated with it. As we see throughout the show, Edward Teach's behaviour is heavily influenced by the weight of the myth that he bears. His initial condition is a direct result of living under a legend that does not match the reality of his personality. And yet, his evolution reveals the extent to which he depends on Blackbeard in his daily life. It is only with the positive feedback he receives from Stede that he's capable of gradually gaining independence from Blackbeard to the point of forsaking the myth altogether. But without Stede, Izzy's rejection makes Teach revive the legendary pirate, and he regresses to his initial situation. In this way, the show exemplifies what happens when the reality of a person clashes with the myth that is created about them. Even in fiction, no human being can fully live up to a legend.

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MAYBE IT'S TIME TO FLIP THE RECORD

FOZZIE

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I lie awake with your shadow
dispersed by some absent glow
This again?

Perhaps if I trace it,
I could find where you end and I begin
Is there even such a thing?

Or are we so entwined
that ripping us apart
would only strengthen our bond?

A light shines on me
Is it the sun? Is it you?

Is it a warning?
I reached out for the shore
and slipped on its satin surface
What fool doesn't know what lighthouses mean?

Every coin has its sides, I suppose
Yin and yang, how could that be?
How could you bring out the best in me?
How could you be so cruel?







TENDRILS OF ENVY

WRITING BY BLUE, ART BY JUNIOR

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Jim had never imagined that they would find a place they would call home, nor did they believe that it would be the *Revenge* of all places.

To see it reduced to an empty shell of its former self hurt a lot more than Jim cared to say.

When Jim had first boarded the *Revenge*, there had only been one thought on their mind: death. Most who sought piracy were criminals or runaways, escaping the death sentences that awaited them upon the shores. Sailing the seas under a black flag simply prolonged the inevitable, allowing a brief taste of freedom before the claws of death would ensnare them in its unrelenting grip.

Jim was no different, the stench of death hanging heavy over their shoulders wherever they went. Being on a pirate ship would be familiar company, in that sense.

Death had become an unwitting companion to Jim ever since that fateful day in their family's orange tree grove. Their innocence had been stolen the moment the light left their father's eyes, all for the sake of a few measly oranges. They bore witness to the ugly ways vengeance could warp a person, their Nana going from a woman of God to a demon seeking the blood of those who destroyed their family. A childhood that should have been one of laughter and barefooted runs across soft grass and grainy sands was instead filled with promises of murder and revenge for those that had wronged their family. The burden of Nana and their family's ire was the only thing that drove Jim to continue surviving, to backstab and to kill until their inherited bloodlust was quenched.

There were days when Jim felt that they should feel sickened, but could not find it in them to do so. After all, the people they encountered in the underbelly of society were no better than filth, knocking brazenly on death's door way before Jim ended their miserable lives.

Upon first setting foot on the *Revenge*, Jim had expected much of the same that they had come to observe of all fugitives at sea. Disregard for human life, revolting behaviour, and grandiose expectations of riches and freedom had become routine for Jim. However, from the moment they were confronted with the offer of a "salary", Jim suspected that the *Revenge* would be an oddity amongst pirate ships. They came to a quick realisation that the reason behind this would, for the most part, be attributed to the eccentric captain of this vessel.



Stede Bonnet was by no means a good man. Jim could not imagine any decent human willingly choosing piracy when they had all life had to offer served to them on a silver platter. However, it quickly became evident that the so-called Gentleman Pirate had a romanticised vision of what piracy entailed. Watching the captain try to instil ideas such as "vacations" and "talking through problems" to a crew hungering for battle and treasure amused Jim at first. However, as the *Revenge*'s crew ran into increasingly dangerous situations, Jim found themselves growing irritated with the captain. There was only so much blundering and tomfoolery the trained assassin could tolerate before coming close to snapping. Jim had no interest in an early death, something that Stede Bonnet was driving his crew headlong into.

What Jim could never have seen coming was Stede's folly and inexperience catching the attention of Blackbeard, of all people.

It was easy to assume that Blackbeard would target the *Revenge* for the riches that a man like Stede Bonnet possessed. Jim was certain that it must have been Blackbeard's initial plan for there was no other reason to come after such an incompetent crew. However, over time, it became more and more apparent that Blackbeard simply enjoyed Stede's company. The crew of the *Revenge* was both in awe and perplexed that the legendary pirate would stick around with them for so long. After getting over their initial surprise that the actual Blackbeard was sailing with The Revenge's crew, Jim could understand why.

Despite Stede and his ridiculous notions surrounding piracy, he had brought

a breath of fresh air into a lifestyle that had grown incredibly stale despite its brutal nature. Though they hated to admit it, it had given Jim some time to breathe, to finally think about their own future and what they wanted. After all, it was with Stede's crew that Jim had finally shed the artificial persona of a mute man and, eventually, that of a bloodthirsty killer.

Perhaps Stede's methods did have some strange wisdom behind them. Blackbeard seemed to agree, from switching clothes with Stede to enjoying a breakfast of marmalade and tea in the crow's nest of the *Revenge*.

It was the relaxed and convoluted nature of the *Revenge* that finally allowed Jim to confront everything they had hated about the life they had been forced to lead. Perhaps they had come to that conclusion in the most baffling way for Jim had never imagined they would take the advice of Spanish Jackie to heart, of all people. However, having sailed with Stede, it was obvious that the idea of chasing vengeance had grown old. Of course, Stede's strange ideas would always annoy Jim. Yet...

It was nice that mild irritation had been Jim's main worry aboard the *Revenge* when it came to its captain. Hell, Blackbeard didn't even seem irritated at all; he had readily accepted a life of fancy breakfasts and silly missions in a heartbeat, it seemed. In such an atmosphere, where Jim's life was no longer on the line, where Jim could finally ask themselves what they wanted, they could finally open their heart and be more vulnerable. They could finally accept the love and support that Oluwande had offered to them, and finally look forward to a brighter future no matter how short the rest of their life may end up being.

And then Stede Bonnet left the *Revenge*, and left Blackbeard behind.

Only an idiot could not have seen that Blackbeard had fallen for Stede. To Jim, the reason had always been one they had known, but not acknowledged until they had learned to accept it and live it for themselves. Stede, in his blundering attempts to be a fearsome pirate, had shown them all the possibilities of a life without death. He had shown Blackbeard, the most dangerous pirate of the sea, that he too could enjoy the simplicity of life as Edward Teach.



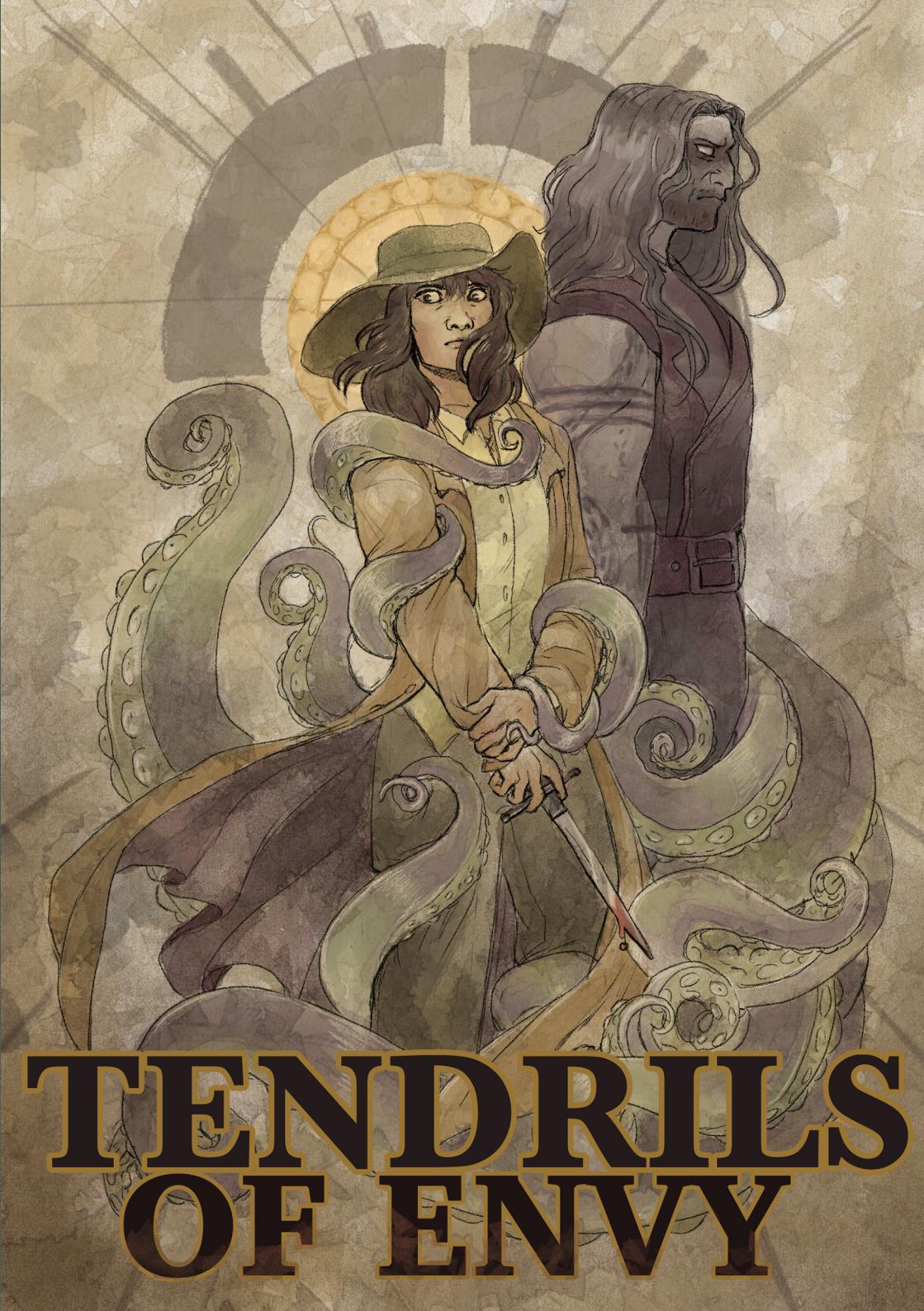
Blackbeard's subsequent breakdown following Stede's departure was, without a doubt, his attempt to hold onto what Stede had seen in him. When Stede did not return, something in him must have broken.

When Blackbeard suddenly turned on the *Revenge*'s crew, it did not take much for Jim to understand why he would maroon the majority of the crew. At the end of the day, it was Blackbeard's skill as a pirate that had allowed the *Revenge* and its men to survive for as long as they did. However, Jim could not help but feel as if his decision to specifically single them out from the crew for their supposed skill was not a deliberate one. If his intention had been to keep the best of the *Revenge*'s crew on board, he would have not left Oluwande behind. For all the erratic behaviour he had exhibited while in Stede's presence, Jim knew better than to even fathom the thought that Blackbeard was not observant.

Blackbeard must have known of their relationship with Oluwande, Jim was certain of it, for they could not see this as anything but an act borne of bitterness. They knew that feeling all too well, having lived a similar life of strife and bloodshed.

Stede had sunk his talons into so many of them, and his sudden departure had left many of them with gaping, emotional wounds. To Jim, it was abundantly clear; if Blackbeard saw his fate to be nothing more than a fearsome pirate, then he would subjugate Jim to the fate of a merciless assassin. He would force his crew to play the role of obedient henchmen, men who would kill at his command and share the same bloodstained destiny he believed he was meant to follow. There was no room for error, no time for a crew that would remind him that there was a shred of humanity left in him yet.

If Blackbeard could not pursue the life he truly wanted deep within his heart, he would allow no one else the luxury.



TENDRILS OF ENVY

LITTLE SPARROW, SOLDIER'S EYE

RENAITREVE

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a little sparrow casts no shadow
keeps its little eyes fixed on horizon lines
on storm clouds that roll in from the west
on stormy seas that roil in spite of the collar
it turned to the winds

a little sparrow works by the sweat of its handsome brow
keeps its little body busy in the salt and sand
unwilling to wait for the cold to pass
unwilling to wait for the wind to change
to keep itself warm

a little sparrow scorns the albatross preening at the water's edge
keeps its little chest puffed with pride
burning with rage
burning with hate
for blinding a sailor with a soldier's eye

a little sparrow pecks at a heart worn on a leather sleeve
keeps its little talons latched onto a burnished hand
hoping it'll strike
hoping it'll smother
and not wave it away with disgusting gentleness

a little sparrow sings its songs in the dead of night
keeps its little head held high
watching as the myth becomes a man
watching as the sailor becomes smitten
by the albatross around his neck

a little sparrow takes flight in the silence of the night
keeps its little heart beating in its ivory cage
on tiny wings that flutter fast
on tiny breaths that catch in its throat
it can't compete with the new bird

that casts its shadow on
a little sparrow
too small to make its own





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